

**THE PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE**

**CAPITAL FORUM –  
TURNAROUND SCHOOLS: RISING TO THE CHALLENGE**

**WELCOME AND MODERATOR:  
WILL MARSHALL,  
PRESIDENT,  
THE PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE**

**SPEAKERS:  
MICHELLE RHEE  
CHANCELLOR,  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**REP. JARED POLIS (D-CO)**

**DAVID CICARELLA,  
PRESIDENT,  
NEW HAVEN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS**

**JUSTIN COHEN,  
PRESIDENT, THE SCHOOL TURNAROUND GROUP,  
MASS INSIGHT EDUCATION**

**JORDAN MERANUS,  
PARTNER,  
NEWSCHOOLS VENTURE FUND**

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WILL MARSHALL: Please take a seat and cease talking. Well, good morning. I think it's still morning. I'm Will Marshall, president of the Progressive Policy Institute and I want to welcome you to today's Capital Forum on "Turnaround Schools: Rising to the Challenge." Is this on? Can everybody hear me back there? Is it working? Okay, thanks.

PPI has had a longstanding interest in school reform, going back to 1990, when we first started to agitate for this idea called charter schools even before the first school was opened in St. Paul, Minnesota. And throughout the years, we've worked on all kinds of reform issues. And we're very happy today to talk about one that's really heating up right now, this question of how you turn around low-performing schools in our cities and also in our rural communities.

Arne Duncan, our secretary of education, laid down a challenge last year with his Race to the Top fund. He challenged school leaders to turn around the 5,000 chronically underperforming schools in America and he's made, I think, marvelous use of the bully pulpit of his job to leverage change around the country. It helps when you have \$4 billion, too. That makes that bully pulpit all the more powerful. But really incredible changes in state legislatures and cities and contracts negotiated between school leaders and teachers' unions, all before a whole lot of money has actually been spent, so it's a heartening example of strong and bold political leadership.

And in the administration's blueprint for reauthorizing ESEA, this turnaround challenge is embedded in that as well. Challenged states, states with lots of low-performing schools, are going to be required to turn around 5 percent of their lowest-performing schools, based on student achievement and growth and graduation rates, in order to qualify for grants from the federal government. So fortunately, in my view, we have a president and a secretary of education who are as serious as a heart attack about thoroughgoing school reform.

And we saw that in this case in Rhode Island, in Central Falls earlier this year, when the school authorities there, or the city, fired all the teachers in their local high school after they couldn't come to an agreement about reforms there. And the president and the secretary of education, sort of, stood up for that, behind that decision. Now, they've since rehired the teachers because they've been able to work out a deal that will allow for reform to go forward there. But it was heartening to me that they didn't flinch because this urgency is absolutely essential.

Closing the achievement gap in this country is proceeding at an agonizingly slow pace. It has been since the mid-'80s. And I think it's really smart for our national leaders to target the worst-performing schools in the country. You know, of the bottom 5,000, 2,000 of those are responsible for 70 percent of all school dropouts, so it's a good idea to focus on the ones that we really need to get on the triage table.

But obviously, there are some large and controversial questions about turnaround, which we want to explore today. I think there's going to be ferocious political resistance if we start moving down this road. It's going to make what's gone before look like a picnic. You know, we're talking about closing schools, the firing of many, and in some cases all, teachers in a school.

And obviously, there's going to be blowback. Already, we're seeing dissension on the Democratic side. This week, Rep. Judy Chu of California, a Democrat, came out with a report which is critical of the blueprint, calling it punitive. And then on the right, you have, on the conservative side, you have a lot of folks who believe it's not punitive enough and who think that, really, the only remedy for failing schools is to close them down and reopen as charters, or maybe under private management.

So we've had high-profile defections from the reform camp, like Diane Ravitch, who we've worked with down the years. And in some respects, that's puzzling to me, but so this question's becoming increasingly fraught. Fortunately, we have a stellar group of folks here to talk about it today, to explore this issues. And I'll introduce them in just a second.

First, let me just, you know, define the terms here because I think particularly for the nonexperts, the laypeople, this whole turnaround issue's sort of murky. What are we really talking about when we say turning around schools? Well, in the blueprint there are four models of intervention that school leaders must pursue to deal with low-performing schools, the bottom 5 percent. One is transformation, which entails firing principals and adopting research-based instruction and extended learning time – new governance models, structure.

The next is the redundantly named turnaround model, which entails the same things as transformation, except you can fire half of the school staff. The third model is the restart, to convert or to close down and reopen a school under a charter operator or another educational management organization. And the last and obviously most drastic is school closes and reopen – and sending kids to high-performing schools elsewhere in the district, if you can do that.

So our purpose here today is to explore the administration's blueprint, to drill down on this question of what we know and don't know about best practice and turnaround schools and to focus particularly on what turnaround means for Washington, D.C., which is why I'm so glad, thrilled to have Chancellor Michelle Rhee here today. Why focus on Washington? Well, one, we're all here. This is where we work and play and I often think that Washington is an invisible city when it comes to the great national policy debates.

It shouldn't be in the case of education reform because the kind of courageous reforms that Michelle Rhee has pushed, in combination with a dynamic charter sector, have put Washington in the vanguard of school reform nationally. So you know, what happens here is going to have big repercussions for other jurisdictions. They're all watching.

As I mentioned, I think, I'm a member, in full disclosure, of the Public Charter School Board, which oversees about 28,000 students, about 38 percent of the enrollment of D.C. in the charter sector – 57 schools. And, you know, I'm very pleased by the growth of that experiment,

which, after New Orleans, is the second largest in the country in terms of saturation – percentage of kids in the charters. Now, on the other hand, having watched this debate unfold for 20 years, you know, only 3 percent of kids in the country are in charter.

We want a beachhead for innovation, but we've still got a long way to go. We're still on the margins of a big public school enterprise with 50 million students. And frankly, the quality in the charter sector's been really uneven and the scale of effort is just not sufficient to what we need. So as an authorizer, I can say that our challenge is the same one that you face, Chancellor, which is to reduce the number of low-performing schools and increase the number of high-performing ones. And it's a hell of a lot harder to do than it sounds.

And the stakes are absolutely enormous. I'm not going to go over the stats, which probably everybody in this room knows, about the achievement gap. One number just did leap out at me. It was in the Brookings Institution's "State of Metro America" report, which said that 85 percent of black and Latino adults in the United States lack a bachelor's degree – 85 percent. What does that tell you? That tells you that our public schools are not preparing lots of folks for success – not preparing them for college, which is increasingly a minimum passport to career success.

That's a huge problem. Nothing is more important, I think, in our country right now than solving it and getting school reform right. Obviously, it's critical to our ability to compete and win globally. But even more, it's critical to our ability to reverse the really disconcerting tendencies towards inequality, economic inequality, that have opened up in the last decade or so, and to redeem this country's central political promise, which is equal opportunity.

So with that, I want to open things up and start by asking our panelists a set-up question and ask each of you to take about five minutes to give us a response to it. And then we'll try to just have a free-flowing conversation after everybody's had their say. I'm going to skip fulsome introductions because you've all got bios in your packets. And I just want to, again, thank you all for taking time from your busy schedules to be here today.

I'm going to start with our chancellor, Michelle Rhee. Thank you very much for being with us. You recently had good news. The NAEP scores that just came out last week noted that Washington, D.C., fourth-grade reading scores grew faster than any of the other urban school districts that gave the NAEP. It grew by six points from 2007 to 2009.

Eighth-grade reading was up as well and yet, our chancellor was quoted as saying that the D.C. schools still have a ridiculously long way to go, with her characteristic candor. And I think that's right. So my question to you, Michelle, is how can Washington speed the chase of – speed the pace of change and reform in the traditional school sector? And how are you approaching the secretary's turnaround school challenge?

MICHELLE RHEE: So I think that one of the very, very strong advantages that we've had over the last few years is our governance structure. So as many of you know, here in D.C., when the mayor came into office he introduced legislation to take over control of the schools – so mayoral control of the schools. And I can tell you, without a doubt, that that decision and the

way that they've structured the governance of the schools here in D.C. has absolutely quickened the pace of reform. And it shows in the data.

So the NAEP data that was released last week showed that we were the only urban school district in the TUDA trial that saw statistically significant gains at both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade in reading. It also showed that we were second only to Atlanta in the total gains that have been made since the TUDA has been implemented and that half of those gains have happened over the last two years, from 2007 to 2009.

So for those reasons and for others that our reflected in our statewide standardized test scores, that shows that, for example, for our elementary school African-American students, their proficiency levels in math have risen from 24 percent being proficient when we arrived here to, last year at this time, when the data came out, it said that 42 percent of our African-American elementary school students are now proficient in math. So it's nearly doubled in a two-year timeframe.

So we really, again – you know, what I said is we're a ridiculously long way from where we need to be and that's absolutely right. Forty-two percent of your kids being proficient is far from 100 percent, which is where we ultimately want to be. But if you look at the pace of the progress that we've made over the last two years, I think it shows that we're on to something very promising.

In terms of answering the call of both the president and the secretary, in terms of our turnaround schools, we've taken that incredibly seriously. And we realize that we shoulder probably a disproportionate share of that burden because, as the secretary has said – you know, put out the challenge to different states and districts about turning around, you know, the bottom 1 or 5 percent of the schools and making sure that those failing schools are being addressed – if you're talking about the bottom 1 percent in the District of Columbia, you're talking about one school.

And we know that we have to work at a much, much quicker pace because the bottom line is that the majority of our schools right now are not meeting standards. And so we have, sort of, taken what the administration says seriously and we've said we're going to do a lot more here, in terms of turning around our failing schools. It's incredibly hard work, particularly at the high-school level, where I think that it's been very, very difficult. And there are precious few examples of places where an organization or a leader has been able to come in and take a failing, large, comprehensive urban high school and turn it around in a really measurable way.

So we know that the work ahead of us is hard, but we believe that we're creating the right environment to ensure that innovation can take place in this space. One example of that is we have worked with CMOs, or charter management organizations – external partners – to come in and manage some of our schools that were in restructuring status.

In particular, we took three of our neediest high schools, and probably our most troubled high schools in the city – Anacostia High School, Dunbar High School and Coolidge High School – and those three high schools are now under the management of these external partner

organizations. In their first year – I didn't expect that they were going to be able to absolutely turn around these schools in one year, but what I did tell them was that what we expected to see was some real cultural changes that were taking place.

And we have absolutely witnessed that, on a number of things, when it comes to, sort of, the culture and environment. You know, kids in uniforms, the instances of serious violence, the truancy levels, et cetera were all – we're seeing all of those things heading in the right direction. And we feel that they're setting a really strong foundation for being able to really turn that school around.

And for us, it has been less about, let's do more of the same, which I think was the mentality of a lot of our schools when we got here. When I came into office, there were 27 schools that were on the restructuring list. And I was – as my staff and I were going around to talk to these schools about really making serious changes and serious interventions, what we heard from a lot of people was, well, we want to create our own plan for how we're going to turn around the schools.

And my reaction was, you haven't met adequate yearly progress for five years. I'm assuming if you had the plan that was going to be able to turn the school around, you'd have implemented it already. At this point, after five years of failing to make adequate yearly progress, we have to implement something that is going to be more radical.

And I think that, you know, people had it in their heads that they were going to write some plan about more professional development and, sort of, frittering around the edges and that that was somehow going to do it. And what we said was, no, it's got to be a much, much more serious turnaround.

And we can talk a little bit more about the strategies that we've utilized, but one of the things that we thought was important was not to, sort of, rely on kind of the same practices over and over again, but to really look for people who have been successful in this field – both locally and nationally – and then bringing the capacity and the knowledge that they have in to take over the management of some of these schools.

MR. MARSHALL: Thanks very much. We will get to that question of, you know – who has this expertise; who's got a track record of success – in just a second. But thank you very much, Chancellor. Now let me turn to Congressman Jared Polis from Colorado. Just by way of brief introduction, Congressman Polis is a highly successful entrepreneur in Colorado. He was also on the – was chairman of the Colorado State Board of Education and a member for many years.

And he threw himself into the charter school movement out there in Colorado in a big way. He's the founder of two schools and the former superintendent of a network of charter schools out there. And continuing this passion for educational change, he's now on the House Education and Labor Committee.

And I want to refer you to our Web site at PPI, [progressivefix.com](http://progressivefix.com). We have a great article about Jared Polis, on Charters 2.0, that talks about a really important new bill, the All-STAR Act, that he's the architect of, that would encourage top-performing charter models to expand and replicate around the country. Once again, we'll go into this question now. There's the really critical question of scaling up effective practice in public-school reform, whether it's on the charter side or on the traditional school side.

So thanks very much, Congressman, for taking time to join us today. I want to ask you, since you're a national policymaker, you know, how do you grade the administration's blueprint for ESEA reauthorization? Is this a big improvement on No Child Left Behind? And, you know, how do we mark progress in the absence of the kind of structured sanction mechanisms that No Child Left Behind put in place, that were so unpopular and controversial?

REP. JARED POLIS (D-CO): Yeah, absolutely, an enormous improvement. Let me start by thanking the Progressive Policy Institute for their pioneering work, their work that led to the explosion of the charter school movement. You're right to put that in perspective – only 3 percent – but in Colorado it's 5 or 6 percent. As we saw here in D.C., about a third.

As well as the support of PPI for education reform generally, which truly is a civil-rights issue. This is an issue of how does our society achieve equality, equality of opportunity, regardless of your race, your income bracket, your geography. The fact that you should have equality of free public education, regardless of your ZIP code, is the civil-rights issue and challenge for our current generation.

I was – you know, the current blueprint for the administration, I'd give it an A-minus. And I'm going to real briefly talk about a couple improvements I would make on it, but I'll quickly move off of that because our real challenge will be to prevent it from degrading to a C or D and only letting it degrade to a B-plus or B. That's going to be our political challenge.

But if you're asking me how to get it to an A, I would say, more of a focus on early childhood, as well as a focus on the continuum of early childhood all the way through higher education. And Colorado and other states are doing great things around access to higher education at the high school level, moving to dual-enrollment options. I would love to see more of a federal emphasis on some of these programs that are successful on a state-by-state basis.

Two, I personally would like to see more explicit preservation and support for what we're doing with – what had been done under No Child Left Behind with supplemental services and afterschool programs, some of which have been proven effective, some haven't been, but again, letting the data drive the process, in terms of making sure quality after-school programs are available in schools where the kids need it, be they provided by private providers or the school district itself.

Now, another kind of one that happens to be my opinion – we probably have disagreements among many in the educational reform community – but personally, I would like to see as much focus on career readiness as college readiness. I think that the plan gives short

shrift to what we traditionally call vocational education in favor of college readiness, which, of course, is critical, of course, is important.

But there is the reality that, again, half of our kids or more will not necessarily be matriculating for a four-year university. Let's look at what real, employable skills they can get from our public education system, even if those services are delivered by community colleges at our high school campuses or the kids are taking college courses while they're there. Let's look at that career-readiness piece at the same level as the college-readiness piece.

Kids really need to graduate and a diploma needs to mean both career and college readiness. And they always put the career and college readiness piece in the verbiage, but really, everything below it is about college readiness, not career readiness. So that's a personal issue that I would have. So those are some of things we can get in Q&A, but this is really a discussion about how to prevent it from degrading past a B-plus or B, which I think we can achieve at the congressional level.

Clearly, the turnaround area is one of the most topical and important areas. These provide a toolbox approach for capable and competent superintendents to take the reforms that they need to at the schools that are persistently failing. Now, first of all, we need to acknowledge there is no excuse for a persistently failing school. People love to make excuses.

They say, well, they're all – you know, none of them speak English or they're all from poor communities or none of them have good home lives – and those are all very real challenges, and by the way, we all support a holistic approach to public policy, and I think our health-care bill that the Congress recently passed will go a long way toward making sure that families from all economic background have the kinds of health care they need.

But again, we have seen models succeed with kids from diverse demographic backgrounds. We have seen schools – in my district in Colorado, a charter school, Ricardo Flores Magon Academy, third grade, 80 percent ESL, 90 percent free and reduced lunch, and yet, they reached 95 percent proficiency on the state test in reading and 100 percent proficiency in math. Again, you look at the demographics and you can say, why is this school succeeding, whereas another school that serves the exact same demographic – low-income, ESL, has almost, you know, the reverse, with only 10 to 15 percent of the kids proficient at grade level?

So no excuses. We know the kids can achieve. And let's make sure that they have the opportunity to attend a school that allows them to fulfill their potential. And these four models will provide a capable and competent superintendent with a toolbox they need to go into schools that are persistently failing and take the reforms that they need to improve those schools.

Though one big improvement over the blueprint with ESEA is, we actually come closer to identifying the correct schools in need of assistance – a major, major flaw in No Child Left Behind, and one that I wish had been worked out years ago, had the previous administration showed more flexibility. It misidentifies when schools are in need of turnaround or assistance. It does this in a number of ways.

We all know it looks at the one-year status of students, rather than the longitudinal progress, meaning that it would misidentify a high school as poor simply because the feeder middle school is poor, whereas it may or may not be a good high school. So we're moving towards the longitudinal growth model, looking at the value added, how much each student learns in a given year – a much better criteria for identifying which schools are performing, a much better learning tool for superintendents, and also, in terms of identifying these bottom 5 percent.

And we are talking about the bottom 5 percent for these school turnaround grants. And by the way, I hope districts go beyond that. I hope a school district superintendent says, look, I'm looking at my bottom 20 percent of schools for what I'm doing, my bottom 30 – you know, if all the schools are underperforming, they should be looking at all the schools in their district for changing something.

But absent real change – and you know, there's little changes that they do and pretend that they're real changes, but absent real changes, there's no reason to believe that they are doing anything to break that cycle of failure in the school, which only perpetuates the cycle of poverty and ignorance in our country.

So it is really our challenge as federal policymakers to arm superintendents and districts with the ability to interrupt this cycle of poverty and ignorance with a virtuous cycle of enlightenment and prosperity and making sure that failing schools are changed in a real way – in a data-driven way that we have reason to believe will work – won't work every time, but taking no action is going to fail 100 percent of the time.

And those actions are never easy at the local level. But with that federal backup and federal support, we can empower reform-minded local superintendents to take the steps that they know are necessarily and that are morally necessary to achieve equality of opportunity and education across our country.

MR. MARSHALL: Thanks very much, Jared. So what I hear is that the federal blueprint is a – the Obama blueprint is a refinement, an improvement, incorporates a lot of what we've learned and it answers a lot of the critiques of the No Child Left Behind framework. But you're a little concerned it will be watered down in Congress. Go figure, never happened. (Laughter.)

Okay, now, let's turn, to get a teacher's perspective here, to David Cicarella from New Haven. David is the president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers. He's pinch-hitting for Randi Weingarten today. Thank you very much for coming down to do that, David.

DAVID CICARELLA: You're very welcome.

MR. MARSHALL: And he and his union made some headlines recently with a new contract in New Haven, which was shaped, I think, unless you correct, in large part, with an eye on what the federal government is asking school districts to do and qualifying for the federal investment to do it, which requires, undoubtedly, painful changes and difficult discussions with your members.

So tell me, you know, how that went. Tell me, you know, what kind of concessions you had to make and how you got your members to embrace these changes in order to, sort of, get with the program, as it were, with school turnaround and addressing the low-performing schools.

MR. CICARELLA: Yeah, and thank you, Will. In terms of – I want to just reference, if I can, Michelle’s earlier comments, and I agree with her, that we do need more radical change. People are a little bit tired of us working around the perimeter, saying we’re making changes, and we really haven’t done anything effective for quite a long time. The congressman mentioned, as well, it’s not okay to have failing schools. We all recognize that. So we need to make sure that we address that problem. Folks need to be accountable for what we do, all right.

What we did in New Haven – the four models – and they’re all good – they have lots of good parts to them – the only part we were concerned about is that it doesn’t necessarily provide for – it’s rather prescriptive and it doesn’t provide for much collaboration and cooperation. So what we did in New Haven – we did, as Will mentioned, we took the federal models, took a look at those. We wanted to make sure we’re in step with what the federal government wants us to do. But we kind of created a fifth model, if you will.

And what we did – the two things we had to address, first. The two big issues with all teachers’ unions is tenure and the use of test scores in a teacher’s evaluation. And tenure’s an issue, perhaps, not for today, I will reckon – unless someone wants to talk about it later. I’d be happy to. But in terms of the teacher evaluation, what we did throughout: We tried to emphasize that there was going to be collaboration and cooperation in every aspect. This is my 32<sup>nd</sup> year as a teacher. I spent 28 years as a classroom teacher. I’m a relatively new union president and I think that, perhaps, served me well. It gave us a fresh start, a fresh look at things.

And we decided that we did need to take on the issue of the teacher evaluation system. It was broken. It needed to be addressed. And we did that. What we did do for the low-performing schools in particular is many of the things that the federal government has suggested. And they were good suggestions, good guidelines.

But we’ve given the – the school district has given, with our union contract, complete flexibility for these schools to change staff. They can change the principal. The only thing we’ve said is you don’t have to if you don’t want to. We didn’t want to say that the principal must be fired. That’s one area we disagree with. If you have a good principal in a building, there’s no reason to fire that person and get rid of everybody, or say that you must get rid of half. Sometimes, you may need to get rid of more than 50 percent and on occasion, maybe, less. But we wanted to give the school district that flexibility.

In the past, union contracts were very prescriptive – very restrictive, excuse me – and we didn’t allow for that flexibility. So we felt that was important. They can hire back teachers and anyone can apply – teachers, for example, at a low-performing school. Anyone in that school could reapply to that building. Everyone else in the school district – New Haven has about 1600 teachers, 47 schools – every other teacher can apply as well.

So once the program has been set, they decide that they're going to make these changes: longer school day, wraparound services. Whatever the administration came up with, we gave them complete flexibility. You want to hire a new principal? Go right ahead. You want to bring in a charter operator? Absolutely, and a management company to do it. You want to hire new teachers? That's fine. You want to use our teachers for – that you already have? That's fine.

I mean, we felt it was important, in the low-performing schools, to give the school district – the superintendent, in our case, the mayor; there's a very strong mayoral system on the school board – give them that flexibility, that opportunity to do just that. Now, what we did do in New Haven is that we made sure there was really true collaboration and input.

Again, I referenced 28 years. In the past, what would happen – we would always have surveys for teachers. They would ask for our input and then they would say thank you, go off to a room someplace else, make a decision, come back and say, yes, we agree. Or, if they didn't agree, thanks for your input, but we decided to go a different way. So there was never really any true collaboration, true cooperation. They sought our input. When it suited them, they took it and when they didn't, it was just set aside.

This agreement's a little bit different. We were sitting down as equal partners. No, that's making a mistake. The teachers' union is not running the school system. There are still managerial rights in our contract, certain things that are within their call – particularly in the low-performing schools. In our higher-performing schools, if I just jump to it, just for a moment – out tier one and tier two – those are our higher – our tier one is our highest-performing.

We're giving more economy to those schools at a school level: Teachers and principal and central office working together, deciding, what do they want to do with work rules? Longer day, what type of services they want to put in there, changing programs, perhaps – that type of thing. But in the tier three schools, in particular – our turnaround schools – we wanted to make sure that they had the flexibility to make any changes that they needed to, as long as they did it with us.

And I'll just finish, perhaps, my first comments with the evaluation system. We not only redid the teacher evaluation system, which was clearly broken – a binary system, you were either satisfactory or you were unsatisfactory. It wasn't very good. We've also revised the teacher evaluation system, the principal's evaluation system and central office as well. And have also emphasized not only teacher evaluation, but development as well.

So it's fine to evaluate and say, well, this teacher is in need of improvement. This principal needs some improvement. Okay, and we certainly can fire him and that's been done in many places. I'm not sure if that's the best – if the person is in need of improvement and has some developmental skills – you know, has some skills that can be worked on – we like to say that rather push those folks aside, try and provide some intense remediation, some development for those people. Keep them in the system. So our evaluation system has a development component in there as well.

It's completely transparent. Where we have the buy-in – where it's different, you say, how do you get the teachers to agree to this type of thing, where we're going to put test scores on the teacher's evaluation? Well, we're going to use multiple measures, not only state tests, which are important. But we're really looking at student progress – multiple measures of assessment: district tests, statewide tests, student portfolio work, et cetera.

So there's more of a range, rather than judging the school or superintendent or teacher or principal on how a student performs one day in March, or one week in March when they take a standardized test. That's not a true measure of what the student's ability is and how the school's been working.

In terms of our transparency, the teacher evaluation system – six teachers, six administrators work side by side on the evaluation document all year long. And at the end of it, they emerge with, this is a document that has accountability, for sure, but also provides some opportunity for development. At the end of the road, if there isn't the development and the improvement, there have to be some consequences. We recognize that and we agree with that. I mean, teaching's hard work. It's not for everybody.

The principal evaluation committee, that's the same thing. Their evaluation system had to be revised as well and I sit on that committee. I don't think I know anywhere else where the union president helps to develop the principal's evaluation system. And the folks in New Haven deserve a lot of credit for that – the mayor's office, the superintendent – where they would allow that to happen, where we have both teachers and – usually, that was always management's right. But you have teachers and administrators working side by side, creating a new teacher evaluation system that has some teeth in it as well as the principal evaluation system and the central office as well.

MR. MARSHALL: Thank you very much, David. Okay, let me now turn to Justin Cohen. Justin is president of the School Turnaround Strategy Group, Mass Insight Education. Mass Insight's the group that produced what many people think is the bible of turnaround design, the 2007 report "The Turnaround Challenge." He was also here at D.C. schools, working with the chancellor, before going to Mass Insight as a senior advisor. So Justin has a ground-level view of how turnaround is or is not working.

So let me ask you: What does it take? What are the – you know, is there a broadly applicable formula for turnaround that all reformers should be thinking of? And if you have time, I'd love to get you to address this question of the blueprint and whether it's on the right track. But the blueprint really does embody a shift from a pressure approach – a "you must" approach, with penalties – to an incentive approach. Is this strong enough to get reform at the pace we need?

JUSTIN COHEN: Yeah, I'm glad you asked about the school level because everything we do at a federal level, a state level, a local policy level, ultimately has to lead to better structures, better teaching, better instruction in individual schools. So what we tried to do in "The Turnaround Challenge," the report that Will referenced, was to say, here are the things that

all high-poverty, high-performing schools have in common – just digging deeply into the EdTrust research and everybody who looks at this issue.

And we really came up with three pretty robust areas that all these schools have in common. One is what we call the readiness to teach, one is the readiness to learn and one is the readiness to act. On the readiness-to-teach side, it's pretty intuitive stuff. We create a professional teaching culture. We have a rational human-capital pipeline, retention and exit strategies that make sure the most effective teachers are in front of the neediest kids.

On the readiness-to-learn side, we're really focused on mitigating some of the negative effects of poverty: putting real systems of care in place for children, to make sure that any of the socioeconomic challenges they bring to school with them are dealt with in a systematic way, not necessarily just a one-off way.

And then the third, this readiness to act, was the more counterintuitive result, which is that because these schools, these low-performing schools, face so much turbulence on a day-to-day basis and have more unpredictable needs than your average school or set of children, you actually need more flexibility to act agilely on site. However, all policy we've made for decades has been focused on the complete opposite of that, which is to put more and more constraints and impose more and more sanctions on our lowest-performing schools.

So it's the combination of these three factors that really all of these high-performing, high-poverty schools share. Now, it's impossible to do that, though, without the capacity to act. So the report didn't find that autonomy for autonomy's sake, or flexibility for all, leads to better results. Flexibility, when you have the right people on board, working in the right organizational structures with the right incentive systems – that gets you results. But any one of those three things independently doesn't get you anywhere.

And that's the really challenging thing, I think, for us policy-wise because a lot of organizations, advocacy groups, people, leaders want to point to one of those three. It's about teacher effectiveness. No, it's about poverty. It's about flexibility. It's all at once. And you have to do all this at once and you have to see how those things are interrelated in order to get them done.

So what ends up happening, then, is because our systems aren't structured to do that, you get this strange result where any principal I meet, any leader I meet, any teacher I meet that has been in a turnaround school says, I'm the rule-breaker. And you ask their superintendent, who's the best principal you have? And they go, oh, it's Ms. Jones. Okay, who's the most frustrating principal you have? Same person. Because they break all the rules to get done what they need to get done.

So what we said was, if everybody that's getting results in high-poverty schools and turning them around is a rule-breaker, maybe the rules are wrong. And so what we decided to do was look at, sort of, the vertically integrated structure – from federal policy to classroom policy – and what was wrong at every level of it. And what you find is everything's wrong at every level

of it when it comes to lowest-performing schools. Federal policy's off. State policy is off. Local policy is off.

And without getting into the myriad details of what's off about it, it's a very compliance-driven culture. Our approach to school improvement, particularly at the federal level, has been overwhelmingly compliance-driven. Check the box; you've fired all the teachers. Or check the box; you replace the principal. Check the box that you implemented a school improvements plan. When really, we need to be focused on outcomes for children.

And I think that's what we're starting to do with the blueprint. That's where policy is starting to go. We've moved the conversation away from, have we done enough box-checking and plan-writing to satisfy whatever, you know, policy superstructure I report to and to, am I really doing the rational things that are going to lead to better outcomes for children? And I think that is a dramatic change and I think that's going to take far more work, far more conversation and far more digging in on some of these tough policy issues to really get us there.

Because what you have now is at least a rhetoric, at the federal level and the state policy level, that the outcomes are important and that really fixing these schools and having better outcomes for kids is where you go. But the vast middle management and systems – school, state, otherwise – is still very much trained on and competent in this more compliance-driven culture.

We've done a really good job at the upper echelons – a great, you know, new superintendents like Michelle around the country. And we've done a good job of getting a great pipeline of teachers into our systems in different ways and really rewarding them and creating different ways for teachers to enter the system, but, you know, as unsexy as it sounds, I often say that you need, like, a middle management for America. Because there's this – all the execution happens in the insides of these systems, where so much of what happens for schools depends on those actors. And I think we need to pay more attention to that.

So what do you have when you have the rules in this aligning and incentives align? You have federal policy, now, that is pushing us in a different direction – that gives, as Congressman Polis rightly said, superintendents and school leaders the right toolbox when they want to be aggressive. You know, the four options under the School Improvement Grant program are not perfect, but they're all proxies for something dramatic and something different.

When we look at the blueprint, I think there's a lot to like there. I think it really does live up. I'm worried that we have focused on the lowest of the low-performing schools at the expense of paying attention to how schools get there. So No Child Left Behind was a fairly rigid, you know, tiered sanctions schedule, where at any time a school was in some status. Now, the blueprint basically provides for a binary status – sort of like a teacher evaluation system. Either you're okay or you're failing.

That's not a productive conversation about school outcomes. You know, any system that allows you to get to the brink of falling off the cliff and doesn't identify you before you've fallen off the cliff is a bad system. So we want to make sure that we have rational ways to look at

leading indicators of both positive and negative change, understand what trajectory a school is on at any given point.

And I think that, if I could focus – I mean, there are a number of things I would change about the blueprint – but if I could focus on one thing, I would put a stake in the ground about what success means. If you read everything about failing schools in the blueprint, everything about failing schools, it's always about, what are the inputs you're going to do to change them, but nothing about, when do we declare victory? When do we say this school has turned around, this system has turned around?

We don't have a shared language around that. We don't have a tool set to analyze that. And I think somebody – and I think the federal government could be the right place for this – needs to decide, you know, what does it mean for schools to have turned around? When can we say we've been successful at this enterprise? Because otherwise we're going to spend the next decade arguing about metrics and we know what happens when we go there: We all disagree about what we're measuring. Let's agree about what we're measuring and what success looks like and then give folks the tools to be successful.

So I don't want to water down the options because right now, I don't think anybody's arguing for less accountability in these lowest-performing schools. I hope nobody's arguing for less accountability. I think having real, meaningful options that, frankly, force the hand of people who don't want to do the good work. Reality is, if you're making federal policy about individual schools, there's already something wrong with your system, right? We shouldn't – the fact that we have to have that level of attention for a giant glut of failing schools where our achievement gap is, at the federal level, is problematic.

So you know, if folks are saying, we'll give more tools to the school or, you know, let schools be more flexible about this, I agree with Michelle. If you had had those tools – you've had those tools. You haven't used them. So what this policy has to do is, one: give the right tools to people who want to make change and, two, force the hand of people who don't. And that second part's always going to be the hardest one.

MR. MARSHALL: Thanks, Justin. Okay, well, you raised a great question: What does success look like? What's a successful model of a school turnaround? And let me turn to you, Jordan Meranus. Jordan is a partner at NewSchools Venture Fund, which focuses on the firm's school turnaround investment strategy.

Last November, he convened a lot of the leading experts, including some of the folks here, on turnaround at a big meeting in D.C., which was an early and very critically important attempt to, sort of, organize our thinking about turnaround. So tell us, what's a success story? Who's done it right? Who should we look to to do more of it? And do we have enough turnaround artists to do it?

JORDAN MERANUS: I'm glad Justin has teed up this issue of, kind of, what is success because if we don't begin there, I think we have a lot of difficulty figuring out who should be either running schools put there by chancellors and superintendents, or partners that should be

selected and what that RFP process looks like in order to bring them in. The stake we put in the ground on this is what we would want in any school. And that is the closing of the achievement gap.

And so when you work backwards from a point at which the kids in a school that has been chronically failing can achieve just like their non-low income peers, so there's some – however you define it – that the achievement gap is being closed. That's what, I think, you can hone in on. And I think Mass Insight's done a very nice job of figuring out what are the characteristics, both on the autonomy side and on the school-based support side, that's required in order to get there.

For the last couple of years, NewSchools Venture Fund has been working with five or six of these organizations that we chose because we thought they were capable of partnering with districts, stepping in, taking over the management of chronically failing schools and getting to a point – through all of the autonomy and all of the support that Justin and Michelle have touched on – so that the achievement gap can be closed.

There is no question that there is a significant supply issue. The organizations that NewSchools has worked with include Mastery in Philadelphia and AUSL in Chicago, Friendship down here, an organization called Education for Change in the Bay area, a couple of new organizations like ReNEW – and I'll touch on that because I think it's an interesting founding story – Adam Wherlin (ph), a great school principal from a charter school who's starting a new organization called Up Public Schools in Boston.

But I've now named six of the – I'll be generous – 10, 12, 15 organizations that have either a track record or at least enough work that can give you confidence they could step in and do this work. And so there's no question that there is a significant supply challenge. I am optimistic on a number of fronts, for a couple of different reasons. And I'll hit on two of them and one will get to your question, Will.

So one is that, unlike new work and the new effort and new focus, proof points are required. And I do think we now are at a time where this is not a question of whether, but it's a question of how – because you can go to Philadelphia, get on the Acela from here, go up and hour-and-a-half and go to three different turnaround schools that are run by Mastery.

Mastery was an organization with just one charter school when Paul Bauer asked them whether they would be open to partnering with the school district of Philadelphia and taking on the management of one and then going on two and three of their lowest-performing middle schools. These were the most violent and these were 5, 7, 9 percent of students proficient in reading and math.

Each of these schools, now, over four years for one, three years for another and two years for the third, have come close to or surpassed the achievement gap with the non-low income students in the state of Pennsylvania. So we're talking about 40, 50, up to 70-point gains over the course of that period. So now, when you have an organization like that that you can point to, it does begin to remove a lot of the excuses about whether this is possible.

Now, that's just one organization, but I do think a lot of, like, what has happened with charter schools and CMOs – that same progression begins to build on itself. Because Kip (ph) did this and because Achievement First in New Haven was capable of something similar, because I'm from a school that's inspiring others to follow it too, the environment starts to change. The conversation becomes about autonomy and accountability and closing the achievement gap. And this begins to at least open up the opportunity for organizations that have been thinking about this, or entrepreneurs that are attracted and excited by the opportunity to step in.

The second reason why I'm optimistic is, D.C. really is a great case study, where because of a chancellor like Michelle Rhee, there was at least the opportunity for some of these partner organizations, under not actually the ideal circumstances – all the things that Justin just laid out actually weren't totally in place in Washington – but you had a superintendent who was open to these kinds of partnerships. You had a couple of organizations – Friends of Bedford and Friendship – that were willing to take this on and had enough confidence that things were going to continue to change.

And that's exactly what's happened. The environment is changing. Some of the restrictions that made it more difficult to get to the three standards that Justin has pointed out are starting to diminish. And I think it won't be long till you see other organizations that are now interested in following in the footsteps of the first couple of organizations, Friendship and Friends of Bedford, coming to D.C. because there is a chancellor that is interested in doing this. There's a policy environment, an ecosystem, that is inviting. And there is at least a conversation about this kind of partnership being key to education reform.

So if we're going to talk about 5,000 schools, there's no way we're ever going to feel good that there is the supply of either school leaders in the district or partner organizations that can come close to matching that number. But if you take a little bit of a longer-term view – and I understand, in particular among people here in this audience and people up here, there is a great urgency to get things done now, so I want to be careful and not become complacent in talking about a longer period of time.

But if we look at this as a process, where there are proof points, policies begin to change, other people get to run districts that have a perspective and a theory of change like Chancellor Rhee, new entrepreneurs step forward to do this, I think that puts some pressure on the district to start to change its own policies and make sure that their school leaders have the same autonomy that the partners have and the same resources and support. And that, I think, will be what we start to see, slowly, over the next couple of years.

MR. MARSHALL: Thanks a lot, Jordan. Thank you all for those excellent opening statements. I look in this room and I see the greatest minds of my generation on school reform here in D.C., a lot of people who know a lot. So even though I've got a bunch of questions, I also want to go to the floor soon. So be formulating points or questions, please, as I ask this question.

So Michelle, we just heard that there are outfits that know how to do this that turn in really remarkable results. How do we get them to Washington? What are the obstacles of getting them to Washington, political and otherwise? Can we get mastery here? And though we have to go beyond just the bottom 5 percent, the bottom performers –

MS. RHEE: So as I said earlier, here in D.C., we absolutely have to go beyond just the bottom 1 or 5 percent because that doesn't begin to even scratch the surface of the number of schools here in D.C. that need significant intervention.

We, with Justin's help initially, and then Josh Edelman, who replaced him, have set up structures within DCPS. Well, what we're trying to do is to create the exact environment that any high-performing charter school who has a track record of success would be willing to consider coming into be a partner with us. So I think that looks like – sort of a number of things that have to happen.

One, on the resource side, we make sure that those folks have the resources that they need to be successful. Part of that – one of the most important resources is time. So we actually say to these partners that we're going to give you a planning year and during that planning year, we are going to give you planning funds, so that you're not just sort of coming in – we're announcing you in July and four weeks later, you're opening the school – but that you have the time to hire the right staff, to do the planning, to embed yourself in the community and that you have the resources to do that.

So we gave a very generous planning grant to our partners. We gave them the time period over which they had the opportunity to really create the kinds of – sort of systems that we felt were going to be necessary to make a significant change from the beginning.

We also, ongoing, have what we call sort of a turnaround premium, which as we know, that to take over a large, failing comprehensive high school is not easy and we know that probably additional funds are necessary. So we have raised funds on top of per-person expenditures for those schools to the tune of about \$1,000-per-student more, somewhere between 750 and 1,000 more for that turnaround effort. So the resources have to be there, one.

Two, we've really felt that the most important thing that we've heard from our turnaround partners is that they have to have the ability to staff the school for success, meaning that all our turnaround partners have the opportunity to reconstitute the staff, to interview all the staff members who are there and then make the decision about whether or not they were right fit to stay there.

They also chose the administration of each of the buildings and that was incredibly important. Now, with all of the systems that we have in place, and hopefully the contract, which will be shortly forthcoming, those schools ongoing will also have the ability to ensure that their staff throughout the years will be able to be the people that they feel are the deliverers of results. And that – (inaudible, audio interference) – EMOs, what the most important factor is the human capital factor.

We've given them authority and autonomy over the curriculum. So some things that they can't change are the graduation requirements. They can't go any lower than what we currently have. As long as they meet that foundational level, they have a tremendous amount of flexibility in terms of the curriculum and program that they are able to use. So we don't do a lot of dictating over what initiatives they have going on at the school or how they're getting to their endgame. And I think that is incredibly important.

And then I think last is we provide them with a political cover. They know that with me and with, more importantly, the mayor, they have a champion in the city. So when the going gets tough, that they know that they can rely on us. When they're making really difficult decisions, but ones that are right for kids that we're not going to leave them hanging there in the wind, but we're really going to back everything that they're doing.

So I think those are the pieces. And probably what differentiates being able to move into the partnerships with us versus starting a charter school is all of the facility issues are taken care of as a DCPS partnership school. So could any one of these partners have come in and started a brand-new charter school in D.C.? Absolutely. But one of the advantages of coming into this partnership model is that all the facility issues are obviously taken care of by us.

MR. MARSHALL: Yeah, we should talk about that some other time – facilities. But in any case, if anybody else wants to jump in, I want to give you an opportunity. If not, let me follow up with a quick question. You stressed – as everybody has stressed – the importance of effective teachers. And so the EMOs and the turnaround artists need to know they're going to have the ability to staff up their schools.

And you know, so this points to the role of unions in negotiating the kind of contracts that are friendly to this. You all have a bruising battle here; you all had a battle. Do we have a sufficient supply of highly effective teachers to staff a rapid turnaround effort or to scale up? And what happens to the teachers who aren't going to make the grade?

MS. RHEE: That's a good question. And I think this is an incredibly important point for any folks who are involved in turnaround efforts in urban districts across the country, which is that oftentimes, school districts and unions can come to some agreement about, okay, we're going to carve out this number of schools and then allow those schools to reconstitute and that sort of thing, right? So we've done that with our unions in the past as well.

Here's the problem, is that if you are reconstituting schools, and those individual schools can decide that those individuals are not right to be at that school for the following year, that's great for those schools. But as long as the collective bargaining agreement guarantees those teachers jobs in the district, you have a very significant problem.

And let me play this out for you. We reconstituted two of the partner schools, so Anacostia and Dunbar last year. Say each school had about 100 teachers, okay? Then you're talking about now potentially up to 200 teachers being displaced through that process that now are owed a job in the system.

We only have 10 other large comprehensive high schools in the system. So if each of them is hiring 20 teachers the next year, and we have the forced – (inaudible), then that means that every single one of the new hires that they have is someone who was forced on them from that failing school.

So you're talking about schools that are barely hanging on by their fingertips above these lowest performing schools, and then you're going to put them in a situation where every single one of their new hires is somebody who was forced on them? They can't actually interview and hire from a free market? That's enough to drive a principal and an entire school just crazy.

So you have to look at the systemic ramifications that these reconstitutions have. The only way to solve this problem is to have a collective bargaining agreement, such as the one that we've come to agreement with, with our teacher's union, which says you're going to have mutual consent in the district, meaning you never force a teacher to go somewhere, and vice versa, you never force a teacher onto a school if the school does not believe that that teacher is going to add value to their school program.

And then you have to have a relief valve because in New York, Joel Klein has this mutual consent but then if people don't find a place in it, he still has to keep them on the payroll. You have to have a relief valve for that, meaning that if people don't get picked up, then something happens, right?

In our new contract, what happens is if teachers don't find a mutual consent placement and they've been displaced from their school, if you are rated as ineffective or minimally effective based on our new evaluation system, then you're terminated from the system. If you are one of the highly effective teachers who has chosen to go on the pay-per-performance system and at any point you can't find a job in the system, then we can remove you as well.

And then the last group of people are effective teachers who have chosen not to go on the pay-per-performance system, and for those individuals, we offer three options. You can pick an early retirement, you can have a \$25,000 buyout or you can stay on payroll only for one year, over which time you can look for a new placement.

That's a reasonable, sort of fair kind of dynamic for those people. But what it does is that it doesn't create an environment either where you're having to force teachers onto a school that doesn't think they're going to quite fit and you don't create this sort of impossible-to-manage budget-line item which Joel Klein has up in New York, where you have to have all these teachers on the payroll but there's nowhere for them to go.

MR. MARSHALL: And in the new contract, who decides – who assesses the teachers to decide whether they belong on the – (inaudible)?

MS. RHEE: So in our current contract, when an individual school has a – sort of a decrease in enrollments or something like that that causes some kind of a need to – what we call access a teacher from a building, that access is determined by seniority. In the new contract, that

access will be determined by performance. And actually, teachers, staff and community members in the school will have a say in making those decisions.

MR. MARSHALL: Thanks. Jared?

REP. POLIS: The – you hit on a real piece, making sure that there is a – not only an adequate supply of new teachers, but the right kind of professional development and training to help existing teachers become even better. One of my bills is called “Great Teachers, Great Schools.” It takes on this whole teacher training, professional development, mentorship piece at the federal level, providing some resources.

And another thing to keep in mind is that you know, there are always going to be some teachers who are so good they’ll succeed in any environment, even the worst. There will also be a few that are so bad, they’ll fail in even in the worst environment. The vast majority will succeed or fail depending on the school culture, the site leadership, everything that’s going on and that’s why these transformations are so important.

You know, there’s a valid point that it’s not always the teachers. It’s not. Well, again, there’s some teachers that will, on the extremes, many teachers will succeed in one environment and not in another environment. It could be because of their curriculum. It could be because of the site leadership. It could be because of the morale that’s being built.

And bringing along those teachers is what’s critical to help schools improve and serve all kids.

MR. MARSHALL: David, I want to get you in.

MR. CICARELLA: Yeah, I think it’s some good, valid points for sure. In terms of – the assumption is if there are poor test scores in a building, then therefore, it’s the teacher’s fault, so we have to get rid of all the teachers. Let’s fire everybody and that’s stuff that kind of rolls downhill, where you can turn around say, well, let’s see, we have principals in the building, we have superintendents, we have curriculum supervisors.

They’re running the school system. Then, it must be their fault, then, right? So it gets kicked – it’s been getting kicked back and forth for years and years. It comes from on top – (inaudible) – we’ve got to get rid of teachers, we have a problem with the teachers. The teachers say it’s not a problem with us, you know, the parents aren’t engaged.

We don’t get support from administration. And really, what it’s become – this is why we focus so much on the teacher evaluation system because the way it is right now – certainly – the way it is right now is that the evaluation system – the reason the unions have railed against. They said, well, why are you insistent on protecting members’ jobs? Because we want to just be sure that they’ve been fairly evaluated and then they have an opportunity to improve.

And then at the end of the day, there’s going to have to be some consequences. I mean, that’s what we’ve said in New Haven. We think that makes sense. So what we’ve done with

their evaluation system is we said, yes, you know, you can't wait four and five years – not acceptable. But we can certainly identify teachers.

Teachers are identified. They created an evaluation system that fairly identifies teachers in need of improvement, provides some real opportunity for development and improvement. They work throughout the course of the year. Give them adequate time to do that. At the end of a school year, I mean, if I've been fairly evaluated.

And I've been given a real opportunity to improve – I mean a real plan of improving, not some of the plans we have now, where some poor instructional coach who's overstretched and overworked runs in the room for a once or twice over the course of a month or two and that's the improvement plan. And then in May, you want to say, well, we're going to fire these teachers because they haven't improved.

Well, they've had no real opportunity. But our position here is – what our contract – and I think – which is where we've gotten some credit for and I think it's deserved it is that we've said we'll look at that. But the evaluation system has to be fair. The opportunities to improve have to be real. And then at the end of the day, when May or June come along and that teacher hasn't made improvement, yet, we agree. We agree those folks, perhaps, should move.

Also, the principals as well. They need to be accountable, right on up the line. Central office folks, right to the superintendent's office, everyone's accountable. It's – you can't just say that the schools have done – the kids have scored poorly and then we have to give it to the teachers or even just the building administrators. Everyone in the school system, we're all in it together. We all have accountability and that's the way it should be. And that's what we've built into our system. In New Haven, we think that makes sense.

MR. MARSHALL: Thanks. Justin?

MR. COHEN: I think one important thing to keep in mind about the schools we're talking about, which are those chronic underperformers is that some of the collective bargaining concepts we're talking about here are great for all schools. They're just rational human capital policies writ large.

In the lowest performing schools, all of the things that we think are sort of wrong or broken about the rest of our systems are just highly exacerbated and you need swift action, not incremental action to drive change, which is why I think, you know, when you talk about, you know, these changes across all systems, you know, it's one thing.

But when you talk about what it's going to take to do it in the lowest, most chronically underperforming schools, you end up getting things that are ultimately more challenging, more painful, more politically difficult. So I just want to make sure that there is a differentiation here. If we, you know, put in great systems, if we put in great evaluations, if we had a more rational professional development process, it would still take these absolute lowest performing schools years to get even to you know, adequacy, let alone greatness.

So I think having some – doing something swift dramatic that isn't punitive, that doesn't put undue blame on one particular group of people because I think superintendents all the way up and down the chain to teachers should be held accountable for this. However, you know, when you have your seniority policies that basically ensure that your least effective educators are in front of your most needy kids, you've got to do something quick to make sure that you take care of that.

MR. MARSHALL: Okay, well, now, thank you. I'd like to throw this open. So questions, comments? As I said, we have people here who are people immersed in school reform issues in the city and nationally. So please, now's your chance. Now, please identify yourself so Stephen can get your microphone on. There we go.

Q: Mark McKee (ph) from the Bainbridge foundation here in D.C. I have a question that's maybe mostly for Jordan, but I'd like Chancellor Rhee and Justin also to comment on it. Are we – do we have to look for the next mass relief? Is that the supply problem or eternal issue, is we need to find organizations that have that level of capacity? Or are there possibilities for other kinds of organizations that don't devolve into (mere coaching ?), which we know doesn't work for these kinds of schools but are intensive enough, a source of supports that can help move the deal rapidly?

MR. MERANUS: Let me take the first part of that and then I actually think Justin and the chancellor have a little bit more exposure to other organizations that are thinking about doing this work. What I would say is that organizations that are all in, that are capable and interested in partnering with districts to be held accountable for turning around those failing schools are necessary but not sufficient, that we can't change the conversation and we can't affirm the conditions that necessarily have to be in place for this to occur if we are not going all that way, at least in some examples. And I think – let me just be clear that it's not a panacea.

Chancellors, superintendents are going to need a full range of possible – so we have no idea, at scale, how to take an entire system with the number of failing schools that many districts have and turn them around. We now have some proof points about what is working. And what we need to do is extrapolate from that, make sure that what is required exists in other schools even if organizations are doing something just short of kind of full management of the entire school.

There are a range of options, I think, that folks should be considering, but I think the work is unbelievably hard. And if the cultural difficulties in these schools and the disarray that people are walking into is so severe that if we don't think it requires really a management system in which everything can be aligned, in which expectations for adults and children can be as high as possible, whether it's the incentive system, their support system, the evaluation system, all being aligned against that, can be put in place, I think we're going to end up in a position not dissimilar from what's happened to over a generation.

As we get better proof points and we prove that we can do this in more than just a handful of instances, then I think we should be asking the question about who else can do it, what are the other combinations that are possible? The one thing on the supply thing that I do

want to note – and again, this gets to the point I made about your perspective on time is that similar to the charter school movement and similar to what’s happened with Teach for America and The New Teacher Project, that these organizations are going to start creating a bench of people that are culturally aligned. They know what it looks like.

And to me, that’s one of the most important things here. When we’re talking about something as significant as closing the achievement gap for low-performing schools, people have to know kind what is it really like to walk into that school on day one, what are the difficulties you’re going to encounter, what are your responses and how do you bring order and really put in place an instructional system that can get there?

And I do think that if you’ve got, as I think we’ll have here, three, five, seven organizations doing this with large schools, you’ve got teachers and instructional coaches and APs that I think are going to be able to step forward and do more of this in the coming years. Again, I’m not taking off the table that there are other organizations that are capable of it, but I do think we need organizations all in to at least propel us in the next couple of years.

MS. RHEE: I really think that we have to be looking for the next NAFRE. Absolutely. I mean, there’s no doubt about the fact that we need more people in this country who have experience and track record and the structures that they can put in place to turn around failing schools.

But that cannot be the only mechanism that school districts are looking at. So though we have, here in D.C., our partners – our partnership schools, we also have taken a tact where we’re trying to really aggressively recruit just great individual principals from across the country and we headhunt these people very aggressively to come to D.C. and turnaround schools. And we try to give them as much of the authority that we do to our partners.

We also have something called the DC3 collaborative, which is a group of schools penciled in the district, three of which are some of our highest performing elementary schools, three of which would be considered sort of failing schools that really, really need assistance and then four kind of mid-range schools.

And the idea behind the collaborative is we’re going to get all this cooperative energy together and we’re going to make sure that together, these people are invested in ensuring that every single of one of those schools can meet its potential. So you have really high-performing schools and principals and staff who are jointly implementing, for example, summer school or professional development.

They share resources across the schools and they span all across the city and they have joint accountability for the result. And I think that’s an interesting model as well. And also, we’ve negotiated that as part of our contract, that we want to engage in conversations with our union about the potential of the WTU in concert with the AFT, potentially taking over some of our lowest-performing schools.

But I think you've got to be open to a breadth of different strategies for meeting the only two, sort of prerequisites for considering anything is one, it's got to be something radically different. It cannot just be more of the same. And then two, you have to be willing to be held accountable for the result.

And the reason why I say that is because I went to a meeting of sort of university folks and I pitched this to them. You know, take – have one of the universities kind of take over a failing school, use it as a lab for the lessons. And one of the university folks says to me, well – well, we might consider that, but we would want to make sure that if it didn't work out, that we weren't blamed for it. (Laughter.)

I was like, wait a second, I mean you are training all of these teachers every year and sending them into our system and you're training them in these models or these programs. Don't you want to know if those work or not? I'm assuming if they don't work, then stop training in those things and move on to others. There's got to be a group who's willing to be held accountable at the end of the day for the results that we see.

MR. COHEN: I think, I mean, I think it's sort of a chicken-egg problem. We've tried to sell this in a very bizarre way, right? Go – you know, Teach for America said, hey, young people, go teach in the worst possible work environments in America. I mean, it's a very strange value proposition. It has to flip. It has to become, we're creating a club you want to join.

Like we are taking these lowest of the low-performing schools and flipping the conditions on their heads as an attractive place to work. And so you're not going to get, I don't think, a glut of great organizations, individuals and a bench to do the work until the working conditions change and until there are more chancellors like Michelle going out there and saying, look, I believe in partnership.

I don't think that this school improvement process is being done to me. I'm owning this. This is something we want to do with the system and we realize that we have limited capacity as a system to do it internally. So we need help from the best principals we can find in the country and the best organizations we can find.

Until there is a genuine spirit of partnership and you're creating the right conditions, you're going to continue to try to do this work with really weak, raw materials. And so I think creating the conditions is just critical, whether you're talking about a changed strategy that relies on individuals or organizations.

MR. CICARELLA: You know, if I could just – it's a great point because in terms of putting – stick our students in – or teachers – in a difficult situation, we have a Teach for America contract in New Haven. In fact, my daughter is one. First year, very proud of her and teaches in New Haven with me. But, I mean they're in a situation –

MR MARSHALL: Is that one of the worst places in the country, Justin, would you say? (Laughter.)

MR. COHEN: No.

MR. CICARELLA: But we have – New Haven is an urban district, Yale University sits in our town and we have some absolutely terrific schools, some that perform very well and some that perform abysmally and you know, lots in between. But many where we lose a lot of the students – just wanted a quick comment – is because they're in a situation where no one can succeed.

I mean I like to think I was a pretty strong teacher. I have a lot of experience, et cetera. You put me in some of those buildings, I couldn't succeed there either. Yet, we throw these new kids in there and then they – some of them, unfortunately, wash out and it's terrible because – and that's the conditions that I think you're referring to that we do most certainly need the change because no matter who we put in there, if we don't change the conditions in those buildings, no one's going to succeed there.

Q: I'm Arturo Cummings (ph). I'm the executive director of – (inaudible, off mike). I'm also running for city council – (inaudible) – as an Independent. My question is, why are there so many new teachers? And, like you were saying, a lot of them wash out. Is there clear evidence about what the retention rate is and are these teachers really effective? And what about the – (inaudible) – there seems to be a severe alienation between your administration, Ms. Rhee and parents – a lot of parents, a lot of teachers and the community. And I've come from New York today – (inaudible). Could you attract – (inaudible).

MS. RHEE: Sure. Actually, I think a lot of the parents really like what we're doing. In fact, if you look at the parental satisfaction rates over the last few years, they have risen. And so again, you know, we still want to continue to improve that and get to the point where every single parent who sends their child to DCPS is fully satisfied.

But I do think – and I hear this from parents every single day if I'm out in the city, people do feel a different level of faith in – (inaudible) – not that it's all fixed, but that things are getting better, they are improving. So we feel good, again, about the fact that we're on the right trajectory, that we've still got a long way to go.

In terms of the new teachers, I think that part of the reason why D.C. has historically seen a lot of turns is because of the exact thing that these gentlemen were talking about, is that oftentimes, the conditions are not great in buildings for new teachers. And I think that it's something that we really have to focus on and you know, I've multiple times been in buildings talking to groups of teachers where they will explain to me, you know, sort of the situation that they're in, the fact that they're not getting any support discipline-wise or anything else from their administrators.

And I take those very, very seriously and in, you know, a number of cases, a pretty significant number of cases, actually removed administrations from the buildings because the teachers are painting very compelling pictures about the fact that even though they really care about because they want to do the right thing, they're not being managed and the right cultures are not being created within those schools for success either for the teachers or the kids.

And that is one of those things that, you know, for me, we have to be willing to say that that's taking place on multiple levels, right? I can't stand up and say that all of my principals are wonderful and that they're providing their teachers with the support that they need, so I have to, as, you know, even though people perceive principals to be part of the administration, I also have to be absolutely willing to take a look – an aggressive look at those places where my principals may not be doing as well and move swiftly to make sure that we can get somebody in there who can create the right environment for kids and for teachers.

MR. MARSHALL: Question here?

Q: (Inaudible, off mike.) I'm the dean – (inaudible) – educational issues department of the AFT. Ms. Rhee, you said that you are providing – (inaudible) – pursuit to the turnaround schools because – (inaudible). And I know that's true because in Baltimore, when we created a number of – (inaudible) – in Baltimore, we also gave them additional revenue and the schools did incredibly well. All of the schools came onto these – (inaudible) – lists. They were all achieving. (Inaudible.)

But the minute the budget crunch happened, they took the money away and some of the schools fell down, not all of them, but some of them. If we know that it requires the additional funding for these schools, why isn't that part of the federal package, number one? And, number two, why aren't we advising other districts to get – (inaudible).

MS. RHEE: So let me be very clear in saying that though in these particular circumstances, we have set this up in this way, provide the extra resources, I think to draw from that the conclusion that we all know that extra money is needed is not the right one because if ever there was a proof point for money there matters or it doesn't matter and it's the answer to public schools' reform, D.C. would be the counterpoint to that, okay?

We spend almost more money per child in this city than any other jurisdiction – any other urban jurisdiction in the country and our result with that expenditure of money has been at the absolute bottom. And so it's not a sort of 1-to-1 correlation that the more dollars you put in, the better results you're going to have. That's just not the case.

I think that to the point that Jordan and Justin made before is about you have to set up the right structures and you have to ensure that certain things are in place. You have to ensure that the levers – the policies are all correct as well in order to then make the determination that, you know, in these cases, more money may be necessary. But sort of overall as a proposition, that would be one that we'd like to sort of act and stand behind.

MR. COHEN: This, I mean the administration is doing a very interesting thing with the school improvement grant program, which I touched on earlier, which is part of the EFEA blueprint. It's a small slice of Title I relatively. It's \$3.5 billion. So everybody's looking like, look over here, race to the top, another big pot of money for school change right over here.

And every state's going to get it. The vast majority of states are probably going to do the same old, same old, but they've created really interesting tools with this money to allow you to do real change. So apply that level of funding in the right circumstances used well, to drive consistent change.

In the past, the grants have been an average of about \$50,000 and they spread it around like peanut butter, \$50,000, half a teacher in New York, great, we're going to get a lot of change out of that. Now, they're saying you can spend up to \$2 million per year and per school. Two million (dollars) might be high unless you've got, you know, 4,000 kids, high school to deal with. But that's real money.

It can't be permanent. You can't say we're permanently raising, you know, the stakes at this school by that much because it's not sustainable and we can't have change strategies that are predicated on unreasonable financial arrangements. But for – there is real money on the table, but they're asking for change.

They're saying if you're going to give out this level of block grant, don't tell me you're doing the same thing you did last year, but more of it. And so there is money on the table and I worry about watering – as Congressman Polis said, watering down in particular that part of the ESEA blueprint because if the accountability goes away, really, the money should, too.

Q: I need to clarify something. I – (inaudible) – suggesting giving schools money to do the same old, same old. In Baltimore, we had additional time for those students with – (inaudible). We provided additional professional development. We brought in new curriculum content. I wasn't suggesting that we're doing – just giving the schools a thousand dollars more. My question is really that that's noted, that you have to do different things, and so when giving the – (inaudible) – schools for the turnaround a thousand dollars, are you doing that with every school, whether they have – (inaudible) – or not?

MS. RHEE: No, because at this point, in order to make that investment – no, again, I've raised these dollars externally. Those are not district dollars. But as I go out to raise the money for this, what we have said to the funders is, we believe that by putting all of these things in place, which, quite frankly – the freedom and flexibility that we're giving to this managerial partner schools is much greater than the average principal in our system has.

But what we believe could happen is that these could then serve as proof points. And if the data comes back that says that when you give these schools this level of flexibility and authority and autonomy and they have this level of resources, this is what the outcome is going to be – then I think you have some data on which you could make a broader case.

But the other schools – for example, right now, we have other schools in restructuring status that don't have those authorities. I mean, you know, again, we've negotiated with the union that a small number of schools are going to do this, but it's not for all schools, necessarily, across the district. And so if these authorities are not in place for the school leader, then I actually think that the money may not be going towards all the best places. So it's about setting the structures and the capacity up in the right way and then investing the dollars.

MR. MARSHALL: I see now a lot of hands, unfortunately less time. Let's do two quick questions; even if we can just get two questions then we'll answer them and move to the panel.

Q: My name is Claudia Garron (ph). I am a doctor at – (inaudible) – for the National Academy of Sciences, committee of D.C. public schools, a legislatively mandated evaluation. I'm interested in any of your thoughts about what appropriate measures are for the district-wide foundation. I've heard mention of closing the achievement gap, but I'm interested in knowing if you think measuring the three conditions of ready to teach, ready to learn and ready to act – if there are measures attached to those conditions that you think are appropriate for gauging whether an entire district is moving in the right direction.

MR. MARSHALL: All right. Let's get another question and then we'll get some responses.

Q: Chancellor, I'm Bill Turque, Washington Post. Can we expect you to announce, any time this spring, that you'll be bringing new partners to – outside partners to run some of these schools? And would one of them possibly be the Washington Teachers' Union?

MS. RHEE: What?

Q: Well, you're talking about the contract being open to the possibility –

MS. RHEE: Oh, the WTU. I've got it.

MR. MARSHALL: Okay, first, assessment measures for the district. What constitutes achievement and success?

MR. COHEN: Can I take that?

MR. MARSHALL: Please.

MR. COHEN: Yeah, it's not – I don't think that's a Washington, D.C., question, necessarily. I think that's the school system. I would say it's perhaps just student progress. I mean, that's what you're – that's the ultimate goal, so how we do it and how we get there – and the nuances of contracts are back and forth – at the end of the day, students need to make progress. Right now, I mean, we have to take them where they are.

And I can give you a very fast example from a place in New Haven. Very often, I was a middle-school person. We had seventh and eighth-graders reading third, fourth-grade level – routinely, classes upon classes of those. It's not realistic to say that school's going to move those kids to grade level in a year or two. I mean, it's not going to happen.

However, what should happen is there should be progress and we need to accelerate the progress because just to move them along a few more months – well, then they're never going to

catch up. You've got to get those students caught up. I mean, ideally, they don't fall behind to begin with, so those measures need to be in place first.

But maybe a straight answer to a straight question is – what's the true evaluation system and what's the measure of success – is, have the students make progress. At the beginning of September, look at those guys in June and see where the progress lies. And look at the teacher, look in the school and then the school district.

And accountability up and down the line. So I'm accountable for my kids that are in front of me. The principal's accountable for the students in his school and the folks in central office are accountable for all the schools that they serve. And you need to look – you need to make progress wherever you happen to sit, in the classroom, in the principal's office, or in central office. There has to be student progress.

MR. MARSHALL: Meranus?

MR. MERANUS: I'll agree wholeheartedly and I don't want anything I say to detract at all from that answer because that, at the end of the day, is what the school and the district need to be measured on. I will say that when we're talking about chronically failing and, particularly, large, comprehensive high schools, there have to be a couple of leading indicators in there that, as more kids are testing and as the composition of the school changes a bit – whether it is a reduction in violent incidents, whether it is attendance – all of that should be part of it. Because I do think those are reflective of a change in the culture of the chronically failing schools.

They do not at all subvert the importance of student achievement. But I do think when we're asking people to come in and step into situations that are unbelievably challenging, we should be thinking about the different indicators so that it's not actually July when we are having those conversations around accountability, but you'll know in October and in January, what does attendance look like?

What does persistence look like? Do the kids that were supposed to be in that school and the kids that had been in that school – have they stayed? Or are you educating a different student body? So there are a couple of other things that I'd thrown in there, which people have talked about and I just don't want them to get lost in this conversation.

MS. RHEE: I just want to add something to that because I don't want to put our partners at a disadvantage in this, which is that you have to look at what the baseline data is. So here in the district, the way that attendance had worked is that you are assumed to be present unless you are marked absent. But the percentage of teachers who were actually entering attendance was really, really low. In the high schools, there were some that were less than 20 percent.

So it may have looked like the attendance was high. And then once the partners had come in and actually started taking attendance, it looked like there was a drop, when in fact, that actually wasn't the reality. So I think you have to take those things into account and not, sort of, make a lot of assumptions about that data until you look at the integrity of the data.

MR. MERANUS: And the Green Dot example in Los Angeles is a pretty good example of this.

MS. RHEE: Absolutely.

MR. MERANUS: Look, there are people way more sophisticated in going through the data than I am, but after a year, the turnaround of Locke High School, when student performance in aggregate had not changed much, it opened up the possibility for detractors to step in and say, see, it did not work. But there was a lot more there. I think they had – two-and-a-half times the number of students from the year before had taken the test. The number of kids that were in attendance had changed dramatically. The number of fights and violent incidents had been reduced dramatically.

And what I would say is if all of that is true, I am more than willing to say the culture is starting to change there. And over three years, you're going to see dramatic student performance gains. And if not, those things should not at all come in the place of student achievement, but I do think we need to respect both the integrity of the data and what that symbolizes for the change of a school's culture.

MR. COHEN: So two points. One is that there are actually other, counterintuitive leading indicators to look out for: truancy, you know, graduation rates – a lot of these things are actually – you have to communicate them up front to your stakeholders so that you don't have detraction when it's actually, like, no, attendance should actually look like it's going down because we're measuring it now, as opposed to before when we weren't. So I would be very careful about those counterintuitive ones because they do exist.

Second is, to Joan's point, earlier, you know, you get 10 schools. You put them in the chancellor's zone. They improve. You exhale because you invested a ton of time, energy and, sort of, sweat and tears in doing it. And then you move on to the next challenge because inevitably, in a low-performing school system, there's always a next challenge. Well, those schools are going to slide right back if you stop focusing on them with the same intensity.

And I think that's exactly what you're illustrating. So I think we need to get to a point where we understand that, you know, if your school's at 10-percent proficiency in math and you have three double-digit years, you're still below 50. But you go, oh, we're at 40 now. Let's move on, on to the next one. But really, you have to do something that's setting those schools up for long-term excellence, not just get them out of the pits.

MR. MARSHALL: Bill, your question was –

Q: Yeah – (inaudible).

MR. MARSHALL: – what's in the works.

MS. RHEE: I'll let you know as soon as we make those decisions. And in terms of the WTU partnership, I mean, this is something that we have talked with the WTU about almost

since I got here, about the potential of doing this. And I think it holds a lot of promise because I do think it's an opportunity for us to collaborate on one of the most important and most intractable issues that people see in school districts – in urban districts across the country these days, which is, how do you turn around the failing schools?

And it provides the opportunity for the administration and the union to work together, to be really innovative. Our union, right now, has its hands full. But as soon as their contract is over, we will absolutely pursue these conversations in earnest because I think for them to be one of the many options that we have – and, you know, to be able to focus some of those extra, external dollars on an initiative that really is done in collaboration, I think, is an important one.

MR. MARSHALL: Thank you. Let me take the prerogative of the chair to pose a final question to you, Michelle. And it's a parochial one, so I'm sorry, but I have to ask you. We haven't talked much about conversion to charter as an option for turnaround. And that's only happened once in this city, in the case of Paul, many years ago. It was a bloody, contentious thing, but that was then. Are you open to this as a way of dealing with the need to bring in other management organizations? And would you welcome chartering authority yourself?

MS. RHEE: So the answer to the first question is absolutely. As I said before, the only prerequisite for me to really consider something as an option for our turnaround schools is that it's markedly different and are you willing to be held accountable. But I think conversions are one way to do that. We have had a number of circumstances here in the district where we have actually closed down a school and then a charter school comes into that building.

That's, in some ways, a cleaner way to do it because you don't have to necessarily go through the whole bloody, difficult panels that sometimes are, sort of, the result of the conversion process. It's a little bit cleaner, but it's the same outcome in some ways. I think the toughest thing with the conversions and I think that this is something that we've talked to the charter community about is, you know, in a conversion model the real question is – and for me, I am open to it because, you know, the more people who are providing a great education for a kid, the better. I really don't care if it's a charter school, a private school or a DCPS school. If you're doing good things for kids, then I'm going to back you 100 percent.

One of the challenges that's come up is, if we are converting what was a neighborhood school, now, to a charter school, are we then saying that that school continues to be the school of right for the children in that neighborhood? And I've talked to some charter providers who say yeah, absolutely, we're open to doing that and others who aren't.

And I do think that's an important part, especially based on, sort of, the geography – whether there are obvious places where the kids can, sort of, go, which are just as close, in which case it's less of an issue if that's not going to be a school of right. But if it's in a more isolated area, then it does make a real difference. And like I said, I think this is all just about the conversations and the communications with the charter providers because many of them are open to discussing this sort of thing.

MR. MARSHALL: Great, thank you very much. Well, look, unfortunately we're a little past our time. Thank you all for your patience. I want to thank a terrific panel. Please join me in thanking our guests here. (Applause.) A very rich and illuminating conversation and I just want to thank a couple people before we get out of here: Beth Kennedy, Steven Chlapecka, Lindsay Lewis.

(END)