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Creation of the Achievement School District: House Bill 1733

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Summary Points

- **HB 1733 would establish the Achievement School District (ASD).**
- **The Commissioner of Education could assign any school or district in Academic Distress to the ASD.**
- **The Commissioner of Education can operate ASD schools directly or contract with not-for-profit entities.**
- **A school or district would be placed in ASD for 3-5 years.**
- **The school or district can exit from ASD if it demonstrates sufficient academic results for 2 years.**
- **Districts containing schools assigned to ASD must still provide student support (transportation, food service, Special Education services, athletics), but may be reimbursed.**

Creation of the Achievement School District: House Bill 1733

Education leaders throughout the country are working to identify successful strategies for turning persistently low performing schools into successful schools. One strategy undertaken in Louisiana, Michigan, and Tennessee is the creation of a unique school district for the most academically distressed schools.

In this brief, we review the programs in other states and examine House Bill 1733, which proposes the creation of such a district in Arkansas for schools or districts in academic distress.

Introduction

In Arkansas, there are currently 22 schools classified in Academic Distress by the State Board of Education. Schools classified as Academic Distressed had 49.5% or fewer of their students meet proficiency standards on state assessments in literacy and math over the past three years. A complete list of the schools and districts currently in academic distress is presented in the Appendix.

Varied methods are being implemented for turning such persistently low performing schools into successful schools, from closing schools, to state takeover, to allowing charters to have a shot. While there have been cases of success, research has not yet identified a “silver bullet”, and strategies that show promise in one school, may fail to get results in another. Meanwhile, every day, students are sitting in classrooms of underperforming schools.

House Bill 1733

On March 6, 2015, Rep. Bruce Cozart, R-Hot Springs, filed HB1733, which would establish the Achievement School District (ASD). Under the proposed legislation, the Commissioner of Education would oversee the Achievement School District and be authorized to assign any public school or school district in academic distress to the ASD.

The commissioner may operate the academic distressed schools or districts directly, or may

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contract not-for-profit entities to operate the schools.

Schools or districts would be assigned to the ASD for a minimum of three years. Initial placement can be for up to five years. Schools or districts that demonstrate sufficient academic growth for two consecutive years may be returned to the local school district or open-enrollment charter school. Schools or districts that fail to show sufficient academic growth may remain in the ASD.

While in the ASD, schools are under the oversight of the Commissioner of Education, and the State Board of Education can make “binding recommendations concerning academic practices and staffing of the school.” School or districts in the ASD may be granted waivers, like those granted to open enrollment and district conversion charter schools. These waivers may include Teacher Fair Dismissal Act of 1983 and the Public Employee Fair Hearing Act. All employees working in ASD are at-will employees.

Districts with a school assigned to ASD will still provide school and student support and may be reimbursed by the ASD for those costs. The districts must provide transportation, food service, building usage, alternative learning environments, special education services and athletics to students attending ASD schools.

How Might This Help Students?

The turnaround model is designed to improve student achievement through autonomy, flexibility and innovation. Proponents suggest that creating a district consisting of academically

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distressed schools, allows for more efficient and responsive educational decisions. A key aspect is the granting of waivers from some rules and regulations associated with public schools. For more information about waivers currently in use by Arkansas schools, see our policy brief: [The Waivers Sought by Arkansas Charters](#).

Teachers are at the center of one of the most controversial aspects of these models: staffing the turnaround schools. A large body of research confirms that teachers are the most important school-based resource for improving student performance, so staffing the lowest performing schools with highly effective teachers is a central strategy for improving these schools.

These turnaround schools receive waivers from the contract requirements between teachers and traditional public schools allowing them to hire teachers they feel will best serve the students. In Michigan and Tennessee teachers at turnaround schools are guaranteed consideration for rehire and encouraged to apply, although reportedly most opted to move to other traditional public schools.

Other Similar Models

In 2003, Louisiana created the Recovery School District (RSD) to take over struggling schools. RSD is run by the Louisiana department of Education and currently contains 80 schools. Originally there were several schools in the district that were run directly by the state, but now all schools in the district are run by charter organizations. All RSD schools are open access, meaning students from anywhere in the city can attend. Although there are many critical of RSD, initial research indicates New Orleans students are showing high academic growth, closing the achievement gap, and improving graduation rates.²

Michigan's Education Achievement Authority (MEA) is modeled off Louisiana's RSD, but is smaller and less focused on charters. The school system opened in Fall of 2012 with 15 of Detroit's lowest performing schools. Schools are open access, meaning students from anywhere in the city can attend. Only 3 of the 15 schools are charters. Although very new, initial results indicate strong growth in student achievement.³

Tennessee created the Achievement School District (ASD) as part of the Race to the Top grant in 2010. Modeled off Louisiana's RSD, Tennessee's program, is smaller (23 schools) and has some direct run schools. In contrast to the Michigan and Louisiana models, however, the ASD schools remain neighborhood schools serving children who live nearby.

Summary

The proposed legislation to create the Achievement School District is an attempt to support Arkansas' lowest performing schools. Based on models implemented and lessons learned in Louisiana, Michigan and Tennessee, the ASD presents a diversified approach to turnaround schools in Academic Distress.

The creation of the Achievement School District could allow for flexibility at the school level to best meet student needs while leveraging the efficiency, expertise and collaboration of centralized support. All educators know that relying on one teaching strategy is not best for students. Teachers want flexibility in their teaching methods to make sure they can reach every student. Teachers also know that collaborating and sharing resources with other teachers can improve their practice, student learning and teacher morale. Through the development of the ASD, the schools in academic distress could enjoy the flexibility to do what is best for their students while enjoying the support of other educators and resources.

If created, the ASD schools would join an increasing number of schools in Arkansas receiving waivers—district-conversion charters, open-enrollment charters, and schools of innovation. The waiving of certain requirements for traditional schools is controversial and concerns about the loss of local control of schools and changes to teacher contract requirements are major obstacles to the passage of the proposed legislation. These changes to the organizational structure of traditional public schools can be uncomfortable, but we are optimistic that the debate about HB 1733 and the academically distressed schools in our state can focus on what will be **best for Arkansas students**.

References

¹ <http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/2015/2015R/Bills/HB1733.pdf>

² http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/la_report_2013_7_26_2013_final.pdf

³ http://www.michigan.gov/documents/eaal/MEAP_Scores_New_Release_20140227_449056_7.pdf

⁴ <http://www.tnconsortium.org/projects-publications/turn-around-schools/index.aspx>

Appendix

Table 1: Schools in Academic Distress

<i>District</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>2012-2014</i>
		<i>Percent Proficient Math and ELA</i>
Blytheville	Blytheville High School	42.66
Blytheville	Blytheville Middle School	49.42
Covenant Keepers Charter	Covenant Keepers	46.64
Dermott	Dermott High School	48.56
Dollarway	Dollarway High School	32.31
Forrest City	Forrest City High School	43.98
Forrest City	Lincoln Academy of Excellence	46.52
Forrest City	Forrest City Jr. High	48.24
Helena/ West Helena	Central High School	44.67
Little Rock	Hall High School	39.26
Little Rock	Cloverdale Aerospace Tech Charter	41.36
Little Rock	McClellan Magnet High School	43.70
Little Rock	J.A. Fair High School	44.42
Little Rock	Henderson Middle School	46.04
Little Rock	Baseline Elementary School	46.21
Pine Bluff	Pine Bluff High School	38.13
Pine Bluff	Belair Middle School	47.78
Pine Bluff	Oak Park Elementary School	48.28
Pulaski County Special	Wilbur D. Mills High School	48.40
Pulaski County Special	Jacksonville Middle School	48.89
Strong-Huttig	Strong High School	43.46
Watson Chapel	Watson Chapel High School	45.22