

School Improvement Grants

Frequently Asked Questions

- **Q: When will the state Superintendent of Public Instruction or the U.S. Department of Education release the names of the affected schools?**

A: OSPI submitted on Feb. 8 a preliminary list of the lowest performing 5 percent of schools in Washington to the U.S. Department of Education Feb.8. In addition, OSPI submitted its methodology for identifying those schools. Once the federal government approves the methodology and the list, OSPI will release the official school list. This could occur at any time.

- **Q: What Tacoma schools are affected?**

A: OSPI has informed Tacoma Public Schools that it has tentatively identified four middle schools as among the lowest performing 5 percent of schools in the state. Those schools are Giardrone, Hunt, Jason Lee and Stewart middle schools.

- **Q: What happens now?**

A: The U.S. Department of Education has prescribed four optional models of school improvement. By March 5, Tacoma Public Schools must choose which of those models to apply at our four middle schools. Each school can reorganize under a different model.

- **Q: What are the four models and why March 5?**

A: The four models for school improvement are:

1. **Turnaround.** Replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff.
2. **Restart.** Open the school under a third-party education management organization, such as a charter school. (Note: Since Washington state doesn't allow charter schools, this isn't an option for us.)
3. **Closure.** Transfer students to other high-performing schools in the district.
4. **Transformation.** Reform the entire instructional environment, develop teacher and school leader effectiveness, reward teachers based on student performance, increase community engagement and extend learning time.

The four intervention models were chosen based on years of research. They represent tried-and-true methods for turning around low-achieving schools.

The Tacoma School Board must assign a model to each school by March 5, because the district must submit a grant application by that date to OSPI to receive funds to help implement the school improvement.

- **Q: How will the district decide which intervention model best fits each school?**

A: Those decisions will flow out of a practical review of our data analysis. The school board will host a staff presentation and public hearing on this issue as part of its regular meeting Thursday,

Feb. 25. After that the superintendent will make a recommendation to the board regarding the best model for each school. The board then will conduct a special meeting March 4 to formally adopt a plan.

- **Q: Couldn't the district decide NOT to participate in this federal process?**

A: Yes. We expect some school districts will decide not to participate. However, schools that do not participate may be subject to state-level "required action" if they continue to underperform, based on pending legislation. And if we do not participate, we will not be eligible for grant funding that can help improve learning at these schools. Because our four schools have a history of low student performance, we believe joining this process now will give us the best immediate help to turn around student performance.

- **Q: How much money is available in grants to help?**

A: The grants range from \$50,000 to \$2 million per school. OSPI has \$17 million in federal funds to allocate among all the schools in Washington.

- **Q: If the district chooses the "Turnaround" option, where will the teachers go once they're let go from these schools?**

A: Those decisions will be part of the decision-making process. The district already has notified the Tacoma Education Association leadership of the news and plans to work collaboratively to determine how to implement whichever options are chosen.

- **Q: Don't these optional models prescribed by the federal government appear to place a disproportionate emphasis on school administration and teaching for the problems of student performance?**

A: That may be true. Nevertheless, the positive effect of this approach is that it drives federal resources to address the needs.

We believe – based on an early analysis a wide range of factors play a role in student performance. Specifically for the four Tacoma schools, those factors include changes in math curriculum, income level of student families, ethnic/language makeup of the student population, the high mobility of the student population.

- **It looks like all the options involve replacing the principals, so where will they go once they're let go from these schools?**

A: Those decisions also will be part of the process and will be made on a case-by-case basis.

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Talking Points

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The U.S. Department of Education has implemented a nationwide effort aimed at improving the education at the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in each state.

The state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has used a formula of WASL reading and math scores over the last three years to identify the lowest-performing schools in Washington.

Tacoma Public Schools has four middle schools on the list – Giaudrone, Hunt, Jason Lee and Stewart.

Based on the federal guidelines, the school board must choose one of the following school improvement options for each school:

- **Turnaround.** Replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff.
- **Restart.** Open the school under a third-party education management organization, such as a charter school. (Note: Since Washington state doesn't allow charter schools, this isn't an option for us.)
- **Closure.** Transfer students to other high-performing schools in the district.
- **Transformation.** Reform the entire instructional environment, develop teacher and school leader effectiveness, reward teachers based on student performance, increase community engagement and extend learning time.

The federal government has appropriated \$17 million in grants to help schools in Washington state transition to one of these models.

To qualify for a share of those funds, Tacoma Public Schools must decide on an improvement model for each school and submit a grant application by March 5.

Our timelines for decision-making and application are so tight they eliminate any significant process. We are being asked to make plans for all four schools in roughly the next 10 days.

The school board will host a study session on the School Improvement Grant process at 5 p.m. Thursday, February 25. Immediately following, as part of its regular meeting, the board will take public comment on the issue. Based on the testimony at that meeting and an internal review, the superintendent will make a recommendation to the board for each school. The school board will conduct a special meeting Thursday, March 4 to vote on the final model for each school.

Clearly the concept behind this federal initiative is to create improvement from what U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan calls “disruptive change.” Although we might have designed a different process, we recognize that sometimes disruptive change is necessary. We are committed to the changes even though they are disruptive to students, parents, teachers, staff and the district.

Tacoma Public Schools has a new administrative team that already had three district-wide initiatives under development – Achievement Gap Plan, Math Curriculum Upgrade, Curriculum & Instruction Reorganization. These initiatives will improve the education quality at not just these four schools but for students throughout the district. The professional development associated with the Curriculum & Instruction Reorganization, under the leadership of Carla Santorno, will result in improvements far beyond the four schools.

We have confidence this process of bold change will result in significant improvement. We already have instituted a bold initiative that is paying dividends. We phased in all-day kindergarten over the last three years, and data shows it’s improved student learning. More children – particularly in our lower-income areas – are leaving kindergarten ready for first grade. This will lead to a positive ripple effect as the students progress from grade to grade.

Improving the education throughout the district is important, because it's possible Tacoma could have had six middle schools on this list for intervention. First Creek Middle School, which opened this school year, combined McIlvaigh and Gault middle schools. Those two schools had low test scores. But because First Creek, being new, has no test history, it's exempt from the federal intervention process.

The process established by the Obama Administration and the Superintendent of Public Instruction allows us to own the changes, to drive the changes from within to support our agenda for improvement. We will make the changes fit and work for our kids.

We are literally making changes in two weeks to programs that have been in place for 100 years. We will put in place in these four schools new learning systems that we can replicate throughout the district.