



**Testimony of Dr. David Anthony  
CEO, Raise Your Hand Texas  
Before the  
House Committee on Public Education  
Honorable Jimmie Don Aycok, Chair**

**April 22, 2014**

Chairman Aycok and members of the committee, I am David Anthony and I appear before you today in my role as CEO of Raise Your Hand Texas.

Raise Your Hand Texas is a non-profit education advocacy organization working to strengthen public education in Texas. We invest in programs to develop high-capacity public school leaders to lead transformational change at the campus level, and advocate for research-based public policies that make public schools better for all 5 million-plus Texas students.

Let me first say thank you to the committee for convening a hearing on the critical topic of turning around chronically low-performing schools in our state. If there is one thing that we can all agree on, it is that we must equip ourselves as a state to act both more quickly and more effectively to improve chronically low-performing schools.

As part of our work developing public school leaders, we have been traveling around the country to visit with school leaders in Baltimore, Chicago, Nashville and Dallas who are turning around struggling schools. We have been encouraged by their successes, and have learned from their challenges. We have met with the leadership of the Achievement School District in Tennessee on multiple occasions to learn from their experience. And, we have been and continue to actively review the emerging body of research on what works to improve chronically low-performing schools.

It will come as no surprise to the members of this committee that there are no quick fixes, magic models or silver bullets for addressing chronically low-performing schools.

Despite the national focus on low-performing schools, the research and practice in this area is still at an early stage. The good news is that there are examples of success to point to, and there is an emerging body of best practices. More sobering is the reality that the success rate in turning around low-performing schools is quite low.

This does not mean that we should not act. To the contrary, we believe that it means we must redouble our efforts as a state to address chronically low-performing schools for the benefit of Texas students.

### **The Key Challenge**

The key challenge for us as a state and for you as policymakers is determining how we build and grow the long-term, systemic capacity of the Texas Education Agency, school districts and campuses to improve student achievement on low-performing campuses in a sustainable manner.

The following are some initial considerations that we have identified in addressing low-performing schools based on our review of the research and visits with campus leaders and national programs. We look forward to working with the committee to refine these ideas during the interim and beyond as we move together to address this critical issue.

### **What Works at the Campus Level**

While you will find slightly different formulations of the critical elements of achieving progress on chronically low-performing campuses, below are some of the common elements that we have identified based on our review of the existing research and conversations with practitioners in the field.

Since you have heard from other experts on the research in this area today, I will refer to these only briefly but I am happy to elaborate or respond to any questions you may have on points of particular interest.

The following are some of the key elements of successful school improvement efforts for chronically low-performing schools:

- Discipline & order in the building;
- A campus leader (principal) with demonstrated mindset and competency for the specific task of school turnaround, and campus-level autonomy over budget, staffing, program and related issues;
- Empowered teacher leaders teaching around an aligned instructional strategy targeted to the specific needs of the campus;
- Regular and frequent reference to student data to guide efforts;
- Targeted professional development and programmed time for teacher learning;

- Parent and community engagement; and
- A multi-year commitment to implementation of targeted interventions (research shows that multiple, sometimes conflicting, interventions are a barrier to change).

### **State and District Supports**

If the campus is the primary focus of change, and the elements above are what is needed at the campus level to create change, we must identify what supports need to be provided at the state and district level to support effective change.

#### State Supports

As you have heard today, the Texas Education Agency has in place some existing interventions and supports directed at improving chronically low-performing schools. Some areas that we believe merit exploration to enhance our state-level capacity, include:

- **Focus on quality of principal preparation:** While we have moved beyond the model of the “hero” principal as the focus of school improvement efforts, it remains the case that very few efforts succeed without a campus leader with the unique mindset and competencies of a turnaround leader. At present, we have a wide array of principal preparation programs in this state with very little data or focus on the quality of these programs.

As a state, we need to focus on improving the overall quality of principal preparation, including potentially the development of competency-based programs focused specifically on identifying and preparing turnaround leaders.

- **Deepen state-level expertise and supports:** In addition to the existing supports provided for low-performing schools, provide a deep bench of coaching and curriculum expertise at the state agency level dedicated to support for low-performing campuses, as well as a comprehensive resource center of professional development offerings targeted to highest needs of struggling campuses and up-to-date research base on what works.
- **Assess state intervention results:** As we grow the capacity of the state intervention and supports currently deployed, it is critical to have the right data in hand. We need reports that enable policymakers to compare the outcomes produced by different intervention strategies.

#### District Supports

While the individual campus is the unit of change, the district has a role to play in clearing obstacles to success for campuses and in providing appropriate talent and supports to low-performing campuses. The district must play a key role in the following areas in facilitating change at the campus level:

- **Ensure accountability/fidelity to data:** Effective use of data is critical to addressing low-performing campuses in a meaningful way. Districts must ensure that campus and teacher leaders are trained in the effective use of data to guide instruction, and then provide ongoing data support and monitor progress.
- **Provide campus leaders with campus-level autonomy on budget, staffing, program:** Every campus that is broken is broken in its own way. School leaders must be free to make campus-level decisions that are appropriate to the unique context and student needs of that campus.
- **Free turnaround campuses from extraneous responsibilities:** The sole focus of low-performing campuses must be on improving student achievement. Districts should free low-performing campuses from district-wide initiatives and activities that distract from this goal.
- **District level “guides” for turnaround campuses:** Low-performing campuses must have a relationship with a district-level administrator with the authority to clear obstacles at the central office as well as to deliver targeted resources.
- **Development of and preferential access to talent:** Talent is the key ingredient to improving a chronically low-performing campus. Districts must focus on developing a robust pipeline of campus leaders with the mindset and competencies of turnaround leaders, and should provide preferred access to teaching talent to campuses in need of improvement.
- **Targeted resources and professional development:** In addition to state-level resources, districts must provide access to professional development, coaching and other resources targeted to the unique needs of an individual campus based on consultation with the campus leader and teacher leaders.
- **Use of school improvement networks:** Districts should consider creating networks of high-performing and low-performing schools to facilitate sharing of best practices.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to again commend the committee for focusing its energies on the critical issue of addressing chronically low-performing schools in this state. Raise Your Hand Texas stands ready to work with you and other interested parties to develop solutions that build the long-term capacity of the state, districts and campuses to address low-performing campuses.

I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you, and would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.