



American politics

Democracy in America

## Turning, turning: what comes right?

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MANY people detested No Child Left Behind (NCLB), but perhaps no group had more complaints than suburban school districts. NCLB required schools to make "adequate yearly progress"; those that did not, including some perfectly decent suburban schools, faced sanctions. Barack Obama's proposal to reauthorise NCLB would direct attention where it belongs: America's most troubled schools. Fifteen percent of America's high schools produce almost half of its dropouts. But it remains unclear whether Mr Obama's plans will lead those schools to success.

The bottom five percent of schools in each state, based on test scores and graduation rates, would have to implement one of four "turnaround" models. This continues the aggressive agenda Mr Obama set forth last year. Thanks to the Recovery Act, the education department has [\\$3.5 billion](http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2009/12/12032009a.html) (<http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2009/12/12032009a.html>) for states and districts that seek dramatic improvements for their worst schools. First, the school may replace its principal and at least half its staff. Second, the district may "restart" the school as a charter. Third, the district may close the school and move students elsewhere. Fourth, the school may replace the principal and adopt an array of other reforms, such as increasing learning time. Such efforts, the president hopes, would turn around America's worst schools in five years.

There have been some promising case studies. Arne Duncan, the education secretary, likes to point to Mastery charter schools' work at three struggling schools in Philadelphia. The turnaround business is booming. The University of Virginia has a programme to train turnaround specialists. Mass Insight, a Boston firm that published a report on turnarounds in 2007, this year [launched a partnership](http://www.massinsight.org/resourcefiles/Partnership%20Zone%20Initiative%20Press%20Release%20Final) (<http://www.massinsight.org/resourcefiles/Partnership%20Zone%20Initiative%20Press%20Release%20Final>) to incite change in clusters of schools in six states.

Still, there remains much debate over whether Mr Duncan's four turnaround models will actually work. Andy Smarick of the American Enterprise Institute [argues](http://blog.american.com/?p=7883) (<http://blog.american.com/?p=7883>) that charter operators should open new schools, rather than intervene in failing ones. Closing schools, meanwhile, does not necessarily mean that students will move to better ones. In a report published in October, the Consortium of Chicago School Research examined the effects of school closures in Mr Duncan's hometown of Chicago. Eight in ten students simply transferred to other bad schools. Robert Balfanz, the Johns Hopkins expert who identified America's "dropout factories", has [argued](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/12/16/15almeida.h29.html?r=2127135498) (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/12/16/15almeida.h29.html?r=2127135498>) that much depends on which strategies are employed where and under what conditions. The goal to improve troubled schools is commendable and urgent. Here's hoping this round of reform has more success than the last.