Expanding Great Options:  
School Turnaround Strategy

As a critical part of its strategy to provide great school options to every student in Baltimore, City Schools launched the Expanding Great Options (EGO) initiative in 2009 to transform or close underperforming schools. The driving force behind this initiative was the commitment to develop a portfolio of high-performing schools at every grade level to provide quality options for varying student needs in reasonable proximity to where they live. The guiding principles are to close or transform schools that don’t work for students, create new options with a strong chance of success and expand programs that were already effective.

Such decisive action was bound to produce controversy, particularly in a city like Baltimore, where residents take great pride and interest in their neighborhoods. In the first year of the initiative (2008-09), City Schools closed or relocated nine chronically low-performing schools, followed by the transformation or closing of an additional 12 schools announced in 2009.

As part of a detailed, comprehensive approach to the work in Year 2, City Schools developed a competitive process and worked in close cooperation with school communities to match the most appropriate turnaround partners with failing schools. The School Board approved the first four partners in Spring 2010, and they are already engaged with their school communities. Year 2 also included the revocation of a school charter for the first time in City Schools’ history.

School Turnaround Strategy:

The guiding principles of the Expanding Great Options initiative are to close or transform schools that don’t work for students, create new options with a strong chance of success and expand programs that were already proving effective. Over the past two years, City Schools opened 13 schools, closed 12 schools, relocated nine schools, expanded four schools, planned turnaround strategies at seven schools to dramatically improve student outcomes, reorganized citywide special education programs, added 1,300 new pre-kindergarten seats and expanded district-wide choice beyond high schools to include middle grades. Expanding Great Options is a cross-functional, data-driven effort that engages representatives from central office, schools, school communities and partners.

The EGO initiative is an annual process that analyzes current school programs to determine whether to close, expand or replace them, based on the following criteria:

- Students’ progress (or lack thereof), particularly growth over time (including AYP status).
- Tenure of the current school principal and the growth or decreases in performance during that time.
- Enrollment, and at the high school level, demand for a particular school, based on how many students listed the school as their first, second or third choice in prior years.
Expanding Great Options also allows for a range of grade configurations. Currently, there are traditional elementary schools (grades K - 5) and a large number of K – 8 grade schools. City Schools also has traditional middle and high schools (grades 6 – 8 and grades 9 – 12) and Transformation Schools, that serve students in grades 6 through 12. The grade configuration of Transformation Schools spans the eighth to ninth grade transition period, which historically has been one of the most problematic for City Schools students.

The analysis described above is coupled with a geographic assessment of the portfolio to ensure that students have multiple high quality options in or close to their neighborhoods, as well as safe passages to school (either a yellow bus or convenient and safe public transportation) throughout their academic careers prek-12. Once fully implemented, this approach will afford parents and students a much broader choice of schools (themes, specialized programs, varied approaches to teaching and learning), while also impacting the entire city as great school options serve as engines of improvement for communities.

With the availability of federal funds and increased research on effective strategies for turning around low-performing schools, this year’s EGO plans include efforts to turnaround eight of our lowest performing middle and high schools. Five of the turnaround schools will be managed by external operators, under the federal restart model; two will be managed by a central office team, under the federal turnaround model; and one is still being planned and developed with the school community.

The core elements of the turnaround strategy focus on improving human capital at these eight schools, which aligns with the district-wide focus on human capital as a primary driver of reform efforts. All turnaround schools will be led by principals who meet a higher standard than traditional school leaders. City Schools is working to attract high quality leaders with financial incentives, including a pay differential and vacation buy-out option. In addition, each school will receive at least one support administrator who will not need to be funded from school-based budgets. Much of the current staff will also be replaced at these schools, and next year’s teachers will benefit from increased professional development (during the summer and job-embedded). In addition, staff will have the potential to earn performance bonuses based on school-wide growth in student achievement. The two internal turnaround schools will also have extended learning time of one hour per day and will receive a community support specialist to help increase family and community engagement.

In addition to human capital efforts, many of the turnaround schools will implement new or strengthen existing thematic programs as part of their strategy. For example, one of the lowest performing middle schools will implement a fine arts theme, another will become an information technology (IT) school, and a third school will establish a science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) focus. One of the high schools will upgrade its Career and Technology Education program related to visual and performing arts to also include digital arts. These programs will receive significant investments for equipment, upgrades to existing infrastructure, and to ensure integration of the theme into core courses. Because Baltimore City students choose where to
attend high school (and now middle school), these programmatic specializations are critical for low-performing schools to develop a broader mix of students, rather than a concentration of the lowest-performing and least-advantaged students. In addition, thematic programs are expected to help improve school climate by increasing student buy-in and facilitating the development of a renewed school culture.

Progress To-Date:

**Expanding School Options:**

- Opened 12 new secondary Transformation Schools serving grades six through 12 at scale.
- Continued to expand charter schools. Baltimore City has the most charter schools in the state.
- All high schools are now schools of choice. In 2008-09, 97 percent of all 8th-graders participated in the high school choice process for 2009-10.
- Closed 19 chronically low-performing schools since 2005-06; we expect to close additional schools in 2011.
- Reduced the number of schools in School Improvement status by 23 percent over two years, from 95 to 73 schools.
- Reduced the number of schools in Restructuring Implementation status by 27 percent over two years, from 59 to 43 schools.
- In 2008-09, City Schools reduced the number of dropouts (from prior years) by 931 students, in part through an innovative strategy called Great Kids Come Back, through which students who had dropped out were re-enrolled. A similar campaign for 2009-10 is now underway.
- Expanded pre-K from 3,600 seats in 2007-08 to 4,800 seats in 2009-10.
- Created two new alternative schools since 2007, nearly doubling the number of alternative seats available between 2007-08 and 2009-10.
- Implemented middle grade choice for 2009-10, which included the first ever Middle School Choice Fair, attended by more than 2,000 families.

**Building a Cadre of Turnaround Principals:**

City Schools is building a cadre of principals for its turnaround schools by working with pipeline programs such as New Leaders for New Schools, partnering with a talent acquisition firm (ProACT Search Services) and recruiting within the district based on reliable referrals. These efforts will ensure an adequate supply of high-quality principals.

Challenges in recruiting and retaining school leaders are similar. With no established career pathways for principals and a relatively compressed timeline for recruitment and selection, it is difficult to leverage top talent to come to City Schools. While professional development for school leaders is in transition, we have partnered with many external organizations on leadership, including New Leaders for New Schools, Aspiring Leaders (Morgan State University and Coppin State University) and Triad (Johns Hopkins University). A focused effort to implement
performance management and additional professional development for leaders at turnaround schools is planned to improve both school performance and the retention of highly effective principals.

Incentives are new with the availability of School Improvement Grant funds for the 2010-11 school year. Surveys of currently highly effective principals resulted in the following incentives:

- Ability to choose staff, including the administrative leadership team.
- Paid time for training of staff over the summer (2 weeks).
- Increased salary (annual stipend of $15K).
- Ability to cash out vacation days (worth up to $12K annually).
- Eligibility for a sabbatical after five years and tuition reimbursement for the pursuit of a degree (masters or doctorate).
- Eligibility for performance bonus annually if school targets are met.

**Teacher Recruitment:**

Teacher recruitment is currently underway to staff our turnaround schools. Operators and school leaders are reviewing current staff to determine which teachers should remain and which vacancies need to be filled. Fliers have been distributed to teachers advertising the incentives available at turnaround schools, and the Teaching & Learning Office and Human Capital Office conducted information sessions during teacher professional development workshops. Operators have also been recruiting independently. The Human Capital Office shared the list of teachers registered for the voluntary transfer process with turnaround school operators to contact prior to the transfer fair in May.

Teachers and school staff would be eligible to share in performance bonuses when school-wide targets are met. Schools could receive $500 per student plus 10 percent in performance bonuses and would work with the Human Capital Office to determine how the funds are distributed to employees. Depending on the amount a school receives and the distribution model, teachers could receive up to $5,000 in performance bonuses. In addition to monetary incentives, City Schools is promoting the mission and vision behind our turnaround schools to attract staff who are committed to the reforms necessary for school turnaround. Currently, teacher interest in either staying at their current school (that is being transformed) or transferring to a turnaround school is promising, and the Human Capital Office believes we will have a sufficient supply of qualified individuals for these schools.

Over the past several years, City Schools moved toward increased autonomy for schools, which included the implementation of Fair Student Funding (student-weighted funding) and elimination of many district-wide mandates related to instructional programs or student support programs. The fact that we had already established certain autonomies for schools has been beneficial, and
waiver processes were developed to deal with requests for exceptions to current policies or practices. Some human capital incentives required buy-in from the teachers union; but with collaborative renegotiation of the contract underway, school-based options reforms were already being considered. A primary challenge has been planning for sustainability in these schools. Many of the reform strategies will need to have impacts that continue without an ongoing funding source.

City Schools relies heavily on alternative certification programs like Teach for America and the Baltimore City Teaching Residency for new teachers. Incentives are new this year with the availability of School Improvement Grant funding, including the following:

- Increased salary.
- Paid time for training over the summer (2 weeks).
- Paid time for increased length of school day.
- Eligibility for performance bonus annually if school targets are met.

The collective bargaining agreement includes barriers, but we are in the process of negotiating with the teachers’ union now, and we are hopeful that we will achieve a resolution. Other hindrances include state regulations that value certification over effectiveness, exacerbated by a lack of methods for measuring effectiveness.