When public schools fail to achieve minimum requirements on educational targets for long periods of time, policymakers are often called into action. Several states have proposed amendments to their state’s constitution allowing the state to step in and oversee underperforming schools and districts. While this step seems logical, the results have not reinforced the notion that state takeovers are the best possible solution.

New Jersey became the first state to take control of a school district in 1989. Currently, there are 24 states with provisions that allow them to take over an entire district, and there are 15 states allowed to take over individual schools. The influence that current school administrators have when the state takes over varies from state to state with some states completely removing school board members and school administrators from their duties and others opting to keep them in place as an advisory board.

A recent study published by Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government found that when the state of Massachusetts took control of the schools, the students in the struggling district experienced large improvements in mathematics and reading levels two years after the state government intervened. However, in Louisiana, the results from their Recovery School Districts have not been as positive. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP, noted that while students’ scores rose slightly in math and reading, the success of the students relative to the rest of the nation remained the same. In fact, the composite ACT score for Louisiana students fell 10 years after the state had established these School Recovery Districts.

What about these successful takeover scenarios sets them apart from the programs that did not produce the same results? The strategies that have become synonymous with school takeovers are often disruptive and burdensome. That was not the case in Massachusetts. The state’s process involved letting go of some of the teaching staff, but most of these firings were in administrative positions and not among classroom instructors who would carry out the changes.

Furthermore, Massachusetts involved third-party organizations, such as the school board and other community leaders, which helped low-performing schools achieve meaningful improvements. This opened the door for more outside involvement, which was something at the center of the criticisms of similar takeovers in other states. By allowing the outside organizations to have some input in the reform process, Massachusetts empowered local stakeholders to take responsibility for these reforms within the context of a state takeover.

The most positive outcomes from state takeovers have typically resulted from more inclusion and more input from other stakeholders. The approach taken by policymakers in Massachusetts helped diffuse potentially polarizing debates and allowed for compromises to be made between opposing parties, leading the way toward better educational outcomes for the students.

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Tuesday, August 14, 2018 at 09:08 AM