

House Bill 32: Strengthening the First Priority Act

The First Priority Act (HB338) was voted into legislation in 2017. The legislation created the state's first Chief Turnaround Officer. The purpose of this legislation is to improve chronically low-performing schools in Georgia. The overarching role of the Chief Turnaround Officer is to 1) manage and oversee a system of supports for a subset of schools identified as being in the lowest 5% of schools statewide and 2) leverage the learning from engaging with those schools to inform practices more broadly.

After a year of planning and implementation, enhancements to the legislation have been proposed. Those enhancements involve four areas:

- **Rename “Turnaround Coaches” to “Transformation Specialists.”** The concept of school turnaround became a national mantra nearly 10 years ago under federal efforts such as Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants. The concept often involved replacing principals and large-scale replacement of teachers. By definition, turnaround suggests a single action or a reversal. Transformation implies something new, a metamorphosis, and acknowledges that such change takes time. Although marginally symbolic, words matter. Such adjustment in language reinforces the positive and ongoing nature of transformation.
- **Strengthen language that highlights the legislation’s intent on creating innovations and prototypes to inform practices statewide.** Initial language in the First Priority Act mentions identifying best practices. The intent, was to pilot innovative practices in a small set of schools to learn, refine, and eventually scale those practices more broadly. This more strategic approach creates a greater return on any investment and lays the vision of transforming low-performing schools statewide.
- **Develop a “Georgia Turnaround Collaborative” (a team of individuals that represent state agencies, non-profits, etc.) that will increase collaboration, coordination, and coherence of multiple efforts to support at-risk students.** A host of state agencies and non-profit organizations throughout Georgia seek to improve outcomes for at-risk children as a primary focus of their work. The *Collaborative* creates a strategic approach to align resources, share ideas, and strengthen coordination of efforts. These efforts offer coherence and collective impact of addressing common challenges.
- **Provide funding for schools partnering with the Turnaround Office to offer \$7,500 stipends to recruit and retain highly effective teachers.** Stipends will be funded by a 2:1 state/local partnership (\$5,000 state funds and \$2,500 local funds). Pervasive research argues that an effective teacher is the most critical school-based variable to improve student learning. Based on such research, and efforts across the country, it’s unlikely Georgia’s low-performing schools will be transformed without an intentional strategy to select, recruit, develop, and retain high-quality teachers. Various states and districts have leveraged teacher stipends, embedded in a comprehensive talent management effort, to successfully attract and retain effective teachers.

